FANTASTIC

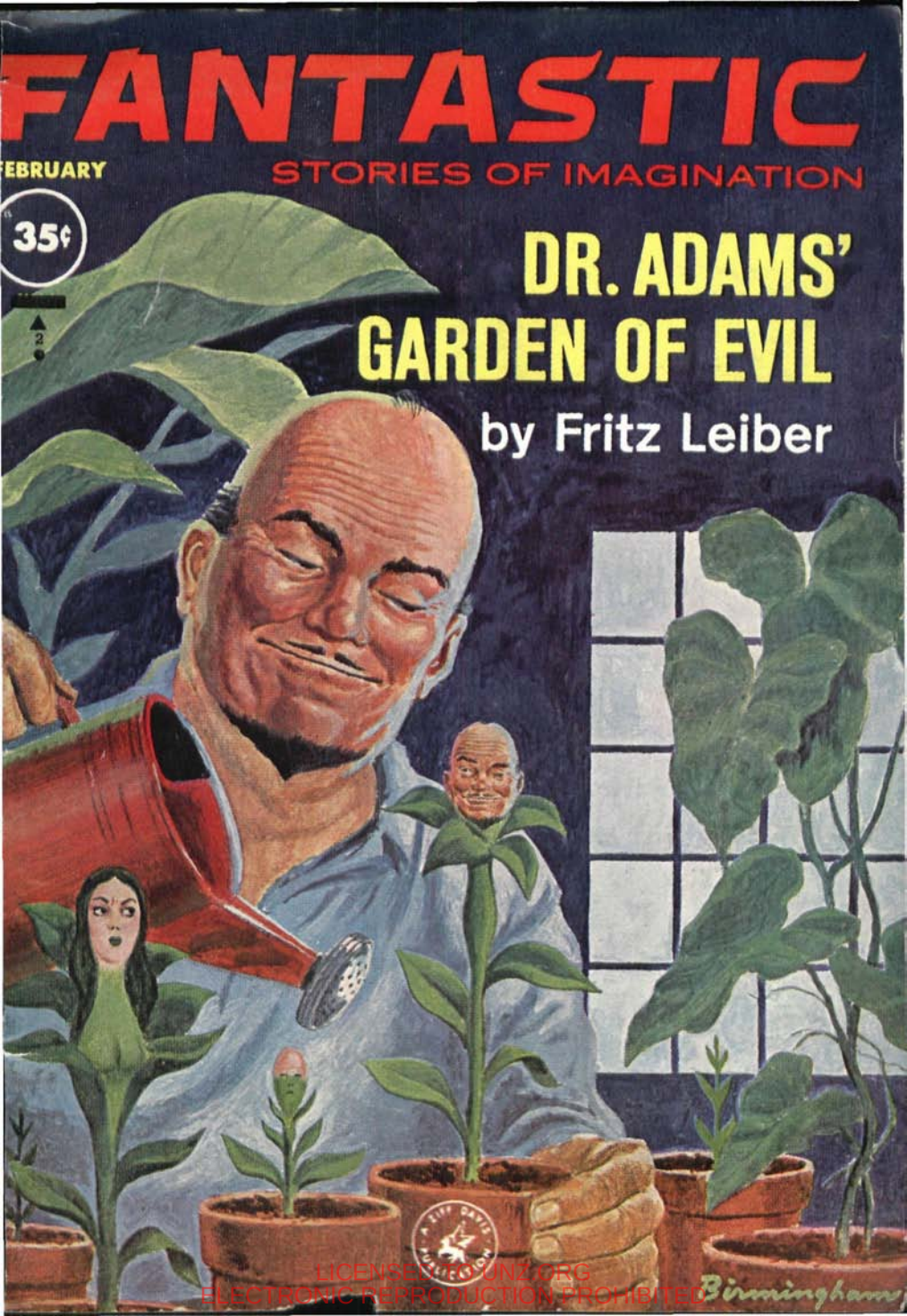
FEBRUARY

STORIES OF IMAGINATION

35¢

DR. ADAMS' GARDEN OF EVIL

by Fritz Leiber



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ALSO IN THIS ISSUE:

A profile by Sam Moskowitz of Arthur C. Clarke, author of *Childhood's End*.

Both in February AMAZING —now on sale

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FANTASTIC
STORIES OF IMAGINATION

FEBRUARY 1963
Volume 12 Number 2

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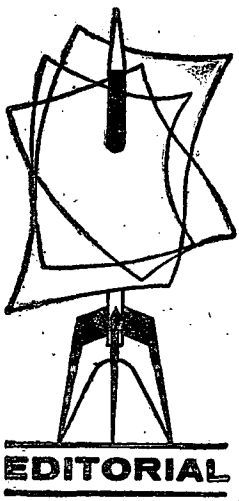

IN line with our policy of passing on to you fascinating fantastic items from the world of what passes for reality, we call your attention this month to developments above our heads and beneath our feet.

Have you been concerned about the profusion of items whirling about in various Solar System orbits? Are you worried that when it comes time for you to get on the Mars rocket, there will be as much chance of a traffic accident "out there" as if you were driving down the Indiana Turnpike?

Worry no more. Lockheed Aircraft Corp., looking about 15 years ahead, has designed an Aerospace Traffic Control Center. The station, to be assembled in orbit, would include a command center, radar and infrared sensing devices, communication linkages, a nuclear power supply, and living and maintenance quarters for 12 people.

Just one question, Lockheed? How long do you think it will be before they get billboards orbiting around so that the solar traffic cops will have something to hide behind?

Much more fantastic—and yet paradoxically more likely to come true sooner—is the vision of the French undersea explorer, Jacques-Yves Cousteau. Speaking not long ago to the Second World Congress of Undersea Activities, Cousteau announced that he was building a village of pre-fab houses, large enough for 24 men, and that he would sink it in the Mediterranean in the spring. Object: to permit a community to live underwater for several weeks.

Then Cousteau sprang his real stunner: his concept of *homo aquaticus*—a man who, by artificial evolution, would be able to live under water naturally. The basic element in Cousteau's vision is the work currently being done by NASA of development of an artificial gill—a cartridge of chemicals fitted under the armpit so that the blood would circulate through it. The chemicals in the gill would purify the blood and regenerate it with fresh oxygen.

And just one more question: Couldn't this work just as well in oxygen-less space as under the sea?—N. L.

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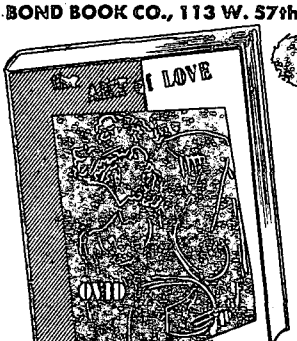

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According to you...

Dear Miss Goldsmith:

I see that you have come up with a way to silence those of your readers who lately have been leveling attacks at your art department. Or was the interchange of lead illos for "Black and White" (Nov. AMAZING) and "Planetoid 127" (Nov. FANTASTIC) unintentional? It will be interesting to see just how many people who object to the irrelevance of the illos in FANTASTIC and AMAZING actually catch the goof.

But now to the real reason I wrote this letter. I really thought I knew what FANTASTIC and AMAZING were being published for—that is until I bought the November issue of each. I was under the impression that AMAZING was the domain of science voted *primarily* to fantasy. Well, I was wrong. I can hardly call "World Edge" science fiction (and it wasn't really good fantasy) and I find it even harder to classify "Planetoid 127" a Fantasy Classic! Now stop me if I'm wrong, but I always thought of fantasy as being imaginative fiction that does *not* depend on science for its existence nor its explanation. Using that definition, or one remotely similar to it, I don't see how anyone could label "Planetoid 127" a Fantasy Classic. Sorry, Miss Goldsmith, pretty good science fiction it is; a Fantasy Classic it isn't. Even though the issue does contain "It's Magic, You Dope!"—which is as pure-blooded fantasy as you can find nowadays—I think it's the Dinkum Oil to run a science fiction story under the guise of a fantasy, when you could have reprinted a real *Fantasy* Classic, say out of UNKNOWN or WEIRD TALES.

One final point that will probably antagonize countless readers: I want to go on record as

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saying that "Awareness Plan" is the best of Bunch to date, and I hope he keeps them coming.

Douglas Bodkin
24 Mariposa Lane
Orinda, Calif.

● *Concerning the interchange of illos, we could say we laid a trap to see how much attention you pay to our work. But what we will say is—sorry, we goofed!*

Dear Editor:

From time to time one has hopes for the SF editor. As a man who probes about the mysterious recesses of imagination & creativity in a logical & scientific context, one likes to think he develops a certain understanding of things before he attacks them. But just when one gets one's hopes up—somebody lowers the boom. In this case, your editorial on the item printed in the APA Journal.

You state that rubbing stones (and related items) are known to "bring peace to the mind, to inhibit tensions, to induce creative thought." Don't you want to make any limiting qualification at all? You say that Psychologists do not object much to tranquilizing drugs with their "unknown side effects" which "may be doing serious damage . . ." It occurs to me that there is one helluva lot more scientific (i.e., systematically & objectively obtained & evaluated) data concerning tranquilizers than there is about touchstones. Another point—you imply (by omission) that there is an equation of main effects of touchstones vs. only side effects of tranquilizers; i.e., you do not discuss the possible harmful side effects of superstitious belief in an amulet's power, and neglect the very real main effects of tranquilizing drugs. (We note the existence of placebo effects with both).

You also avoid the main issue —that tranquilizers are generally not used as a sole treatment, or touted as a 'cure.' To temporarily ease tension is easy (a hammer applied vigorously to the head will physically & mentally "relax" almost anyone). The real problem is to get to the source of the anxiety or tension or etc. The prime objections to touchstones are, I believe, 1. They work (insofar as they do) on symptoms not *causes*. 2. They encourage reliance on superstition and unproven cures, possibly to the exclusion of more acceptable methods (i.e., medical, psychological).

Further, I think psychologists would agree that fondling amulets, smoking, and other tension relieving acts do just that, but let's not count on emptying our psychiatric hospitals just by giving each patient a touchstone—that's a little *too* Fantastic.

(*Continued on page 125*)

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Full many a flower is born to blush unseen,

wrote Alexander Pope.

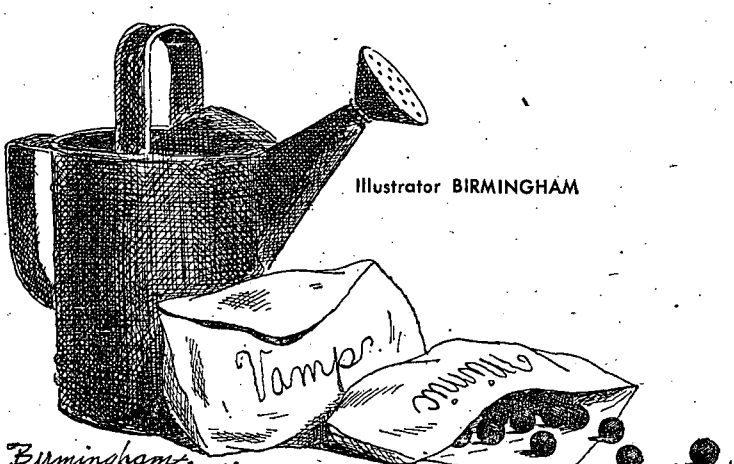
What witchery gave him the foresight to know

about the secret cellar in which was planted . . .

DR. ADAMS' Garden of EVIL

By FRITZ LEIBER

TAGGART ADAMS—Tag to a few other millionaires in the magazine world and to the top echelon of his staff—glared across the jade parquetry of his desk and ten yards of tiger-skin-



Illustrator BIRMINGHAM

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carpeted publisher's office at the jasper-inlaid pneumatically-snubbed door which Erica Slyker had nevertheless just now managed to slam on her exit.

From twelve frosted rear-illuminated glass panels in the walls, eleven superb Kittens-of-the-Month in penultimate stages of undress ogled down at him eagerly, but they might as well have been in neck-to-toe Mother Hubbards or black shrouds and executioner's masks for all the notice they got from Tag.

A deep flush of rage and shame suffused his normally leering stout-Satan's face as his memory replayed the last side of his conversation with Erica:

ERICA SLYKER: Being Kitten-of-the-Month ruined my sister! I would no more consider—

TAG ADAMS: Ruined? Ridiculous! No one laid a hand on Alice while she was here. I still offer you—

ERICA: (*fiercely*): Perhaps it would have been better if they had! This six-story pad of yours is plastered with sex, but there's not an ounce left of the genuine man-woman article. Power-drive and fear-drive have seen to that.

TAG: I'll overlook those bad-tempered remarks. Miss Slyker, I'm sorry as you are that several weeks *after* she was resident here, your sister suffered some sort of illness that—

ERICA: Alice went into a five-day coma! She awakened from it with an empty child-mind, eaten with vanity, all talents lost, fodder for the mental hospital! Lobotomized mind! Vegetable mind! (*Rises from leopard-upholstered chair and points at a Kitten resembling herself.*) And you still dare flaunt her picture? (*Seizes a massive silver ashtray and hurls it at the offending panel, which shatters, the flesh-pink shards clinking softly down on the wall-to-wall tiger-skin and inside the illumination recess.*) Ha! Witch Queen's curses on you!

TAG (*coolly*): I trust you've entirely discharged your infantile angers and will now hear wisdom. Your criminally destructive action I pardon—I like Kittens to have a *little* tiger in them. I *still* offer you—

ERICA: Pah! Sooner than be photographed for *Kittens* magazine with one shoulder strap slipped, I'd make love to you! Ah! That frightens you, doesn't it? I rather thought it would. Good day, Mr. Adams! (Exits, *slamming jasper door.*)

TAG ADAMS took a very deep breath, slowly let it out, then looked down at the seven large glossy color prints neatly spread on the finely-morticed jade of his desk. Each showed Erica Slyker in a pearl-worked pearl-gray suit that beautifully set off her long

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lustrous blue-black hair. Each was posed against a background of jungle-leafed indoor greenery. In each the long pale face bore an expression of infuriating haughtiness, the short, bee-stung lips puckered in smiling contempt, the high-arched brows lightly pinching between them a queenly frown.

He selected the photo that seemed haughtiest, then methodically crushed the other six in his gardener's left hand, as a first-beard adolescent crushes beer cans, and tossed the jagged balls into a tiger-skin wastebasket.

Then he hurried to the chair Erica Slyker had occupied, scanned its fabric at close range, and finally with a grunt of satisfaction picked up something from the leopard skin between his middle finger and thumb.

Returning to his desk, he deposited in a small white envelope a single long lustrous blue-black hair, closed the envelope and clipped it to the uncrumpled color print.

"*She* prate of witchcraft?" he breathed softly. "Ho!"

He rummaged rapidly through a couple of drawers until he found the color print of a rising red-headed young female off-Broadway dramatic talent who had recently refused to become America's Crown Princess of Sex Kittens for thirty days and he checked the envelope clipped to it to make sure three green nail clippings were still there. Next he thrust both prints in a large manila envelope, tucked it under his left elbow, and hurried through the jasper door. Then he was hastening along the deluxe vari-colored corridors of what one recklessly irreverent columnist called "Kitten Kastle" and, eschewing the gilded openwork antique elevator, down the rainbow flights of stairs with their shadowed kiss-niches and half curtained woo-booths, which were strictly off limits to both visitors and personnel except for publicity photographs.

It was 7 A.M. and tonight's party was approaching its aseptically orgiastic climax. Two widely-placed jazz bands racketed Dixie and twist towards each other. The corridors were filled with hordes of beautiful girls with daring decolletages and other carefully-calculated anatomic exposures and with hosts of sharply-dressed, worried, watchful men.

Yet despite the rapid writhings of the dancers and the posturings of the comedians and the chattering rushes of the self-appointed party-energizers, no member of one sex ever touched a member of the other except for the minimum permitted contacts of the dance and the fleetingest finger-touches.

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Ever present was the fear that someone would do something the papers or the police could seize on, something *gauche*, like becoming naively romantic or drunkenly ribald.

AS the Lord and Master of Kitten Kastle came trotting along, manila envelope under elbow, each man drew aside respectfully, with a fawning manly smile ready to pop if the ruddy, bald, sharp-bearded Satan's face should glance his way, while each girl assumed her meltingest ready-to-please-milord expression and thrust forward invitingly, but not at all pushingly, her lips, throat, bosom, hip, dimpled knee, or whatever other portion of her anatomy she considered her *chef-d'oeuvre*.

But Taggart Adams looked neither to the right or to the left. Men irritated him, and as for girls his hypnotist had been trying for the past three years to revive his aggressive male interest in them, with little success. He was hardly the bold lusty wastrel indicated by his beard and tiny mustache, which were merely his variant of G.I. standard for publishers and editors of "magazines for men."

At the moment the only girl who interested him in any way was one with blue-black tresses draping a pale mask of contempt, and she would soon be taken care of in a rather special fashion.

As for the stuff crowding the corridors . . . well, the jeweled sex-puppets—*poupeés de l'amour*—were jigging around the well-disciplined dark-suited male marionettes, the tombstones were jumping at an hour when squares went to work . . . it was sufficient.

Downward and ever downward trotted Taggart Adams. Past the turquoise swimming pool with its bevy of bikinied beauties, each with her invisible guard rail. Past the pool's 25-foot-deep "basement," where a lone girl with aqualung and with silver-blue hair streaming like the beautiful long iridescent deadly filaments of a Portuguese man-of-war glided among the living corals behind the 2-inch-thick view window—and in front of which a boy and girl in passionate embrace jumped apart tremblingly at Tag's approach, blenching at the merciless frown he shot them. Finally he was alone in the somber oak-paneled pale-tapestry-shrouded corridor below even the watery basement.

A quick glance either way assured him of privacy. He proceeded to tap an oaken rosette in a quick three-one rhythm. A silvery-tawny panel slid silently aside yielding moist warmth and flower odors. A kind of tangible night billowed out, and Tag

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slipped inside. The panel closed swiftly behind him.

HE was in an extensive room that was in deep darkness except for a dab of bluish light forty feet away dimly illuminating four photos on a wall and silhouetting just in front of it a table set with a few small earthenware pots, a phone, and hand-size gardening tools. But although the rest of the room was black-dark at first sight, there pressed from it an intense aura of femininity.

As ones eyes got fully adjusted, there was the barest suggestion of ranks on ranks of thick-stemmed, leaf-hooded flowers—flowers giving ghostly disturbing gleams of russet and gold and auburn and ivory and rosier hues . . . or perhaps the suggestion was more of rows of slim living, sleeping dolls hung by their hair deep amid greenery . . . or . . . at any rate, most tantalizing and strange and disturbing.

With a confidence born of perfect knowledge of the room's contents, Tag walked briskly to the potting table and went to work. He set the phone aside. From a tiny shelf below the photographs and their bluish night-light he took a brownish bulging envelope labeled in spidery hand and brown-faded ink "Mimics" (after quickly setting back one labeled "Vamps" which he'd first picked up).

From the almost crumbly-old envelope he carefully withdrew a round black gleaming seed a little larger than a plum's, wrapped around it eleven times Erica Slyker's hair, thrust it two inches deep into the moist grainy soil of one of the pots, and patted the surface flat.

"Requiescat," he said solemnly as he dusted the gritty loam off his fingers above the pot, "but not *in pace.*"

He carefully leaned the color print of Erica face-inward against the pot and drew a second seed from the envelope, but then he grew lazily pensive and his stern expression softened as his gaze went to the four large old photos affixed to the wall. The one figure common to them all was that of a tall elderly lady in the chin-high, wrist-and-floor-long dress of the last century, with a piercing-visaged artistocratic face, the thin beaky nose and narrow jutting chin pointing a little toward each other like those of a story-book witch.

A genuine soft affectionate smile came to Tag's lips, instead of the tight Satan's-grimace he invariably showed the world. It was always so nice and relaxing to be, even fancy-wise or photo-wise, with truly elderly women—sprightly, gossipy, thankful old girls, wittily waspish at times,

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even vastly malicious, but totally devoid of the insolence of the sex-urge. And then Tag had so many reasons, including the supreme one, for feeling friendly and grateful toward his brilliant Great-aunt Veronica, world-famous as a biologist in certain mystical and un-stuffy scientific circles, who ten years ago had bequeathed him much more than her monetary riches.

HE gently rubbed the second seed between his fingertips and touched the still-bulging envelope with a miser's tenderness as he rested his eyes and his feelings on the four photographs.

First, his Great-aunt, not so elderly, standing with Luther Burbank in a cactus garden.

In the second, very elderly indeed, she was accepting in Tiflis the reverent handclasp of Trofim Lysenko, Soviet proponent of the theory that environment shapes genetic heredity, at some time before that rogue-scientist's nominally voluntary resignation as head of the All-Union Academy of Agricultural Science.

In the third she stood alone and grimly smiling in front of the shut doors of what a brass plate identified as the headquarters of the American Botanic Society. That was the one signed "Veronica Adams, D.S." in the same large spidery script as that on the old brown envelopes.

The last showed her in a Parisian dining room together with a group of quaintly bearded men in full evening dress—all the faces almost flat white from an overly-powerful magnesium flash. She was receiving from them the Meta-Lamarckian Medal for her paper, "Seventeen Verified Instances of the Shaping of Plant Development by Thoughts, Symbols, Pictures, and Exodermal tokens."

Tag's expression grew more pensive still and he began to tug gently and rhythmically with the hand holding the seed at his wide-based sharp-pointed chin-beard. His eyes closed and his face grew tranquil. He began to snore very softly.

His hands did not fall asleep, however. After a bit, although his face did not change at all, they went busily to work, planting the second seed without more ado in the second pot, over which he was leaning closely, extracting from its envelope and planting a "Vamps" seed in a third pot just beside the second, finally replacing both envelopes on their shelf.

Then his hands grew still and his face woke up with a shake and a start. For a moment he was frightened, then he realized he'd simply been dozing standing up—he'd been driving himself lately and Great-aunt Veronica was such a pleasantly

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soporific topic for reverie. Strange, though, he thought, the dazed abstraction he'd felt for a moment had been very like the states of mind he used to experience when his hypnotist had implanted some particularly strong suggestion—but he hadn't summoned the man for the last three months.

He'd had a flash of the same sort of feeling sometime earlier today, he recalled. Yes, it had occurred during the first part of his interview with the abominable Erica Slyker.

But *she* was well taken care of now. In fact *all* his work here was done, he decided after the quickest of glances, and it would come to fruition in due course.

Meanwhile he had no business loitering away a moment more at this time of the month, he reminded himself as he spun around and trotted through the dark toward the secret panel.

There was a sharp *bzzz* behind him. It made him jump—for an instant it activated his old fear of bees, a fear most unsuitable in a gardener, but so deep that even his hypnotist had never been able to counteract it.

Then he realized it was only the phone . . . and he kept on toward the secret panel. In a flash of intuition he'd know it had to be his Executive Managing Editor and that for once the bumbler had a thoroughly adequate reason for calling him at his secretest number.

There was grueling work to be done for the next five days, and not one moment to delay.

Specifically, *Kittens* had to be put to bed—not stupid pushy cuddle-crazy girls, but something really important . . . the next issue of a stunningly successful national magazine!

DURING that time Taggart Adams hardly thought once of his secret garden or of the incidents leading up to his last visit there.

During these periods when he couldn't spare time himself, the garden was cared for by an elderly Sicilian deafmute of submoronic intelligence but absolute trustworthiness with growing things—his ancestors had trained vines and coaxed hedges for the ancient Romans.

But now at last the next *Kittens* was abed on its whirring ink-acrid presses, the first run mercilessly checked and rechecked, and Tag had a full recovery-week to do exactly what he wanted—no parties to appear at, no avidly hopeful new girls to check over, no boringly protracted undress photography sessions, no new geniuses to give a grudging hearing, no V.I.P.'s to bully and charm . . . and only one or two members, if that many, of his house-or-magazine-

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staff knowing what he really was up to or even where he really was.

He could canoe-copt through Canada's hiddenmost lakes, submarine the West Indies in his technically-illegal private submersible, dig London, take a whirl through the Continental capitols, shoot Africa with the seventh wealthiest man in the world, study the Swiss banking system from the inside, or simply tend his secret garden . . . quietly vegetate . . .

Well, in any case he would start off with a look-see at the last, he decided.

This time when the panel closed behind him, it was "day" inside. Great glowing checkerboards of window-simulating, sunshine-shedding panels in ceiling and walls made him squint. He patiently let his eyes accommodate and after a minute he saw his garden in its full glory.

To either side of the aisle between him and the potting table, row on row of potted plants went back in rising banks of the walls of the huge room. Each plant was like a large jack-in-the-pulpit or love-in-a-mist or fever-tree flower, in that each thick-stemmed bloom was canopied and bowered by great dark green leaves of the sort botanists called spathes and bracts.

But these must be jills-in-the-pulpit, for each green alcove enshrined a flowering slim girl about twelve inches high. Many showed only their faces, though with swellings in the stem indicating where bosoms and hips were developing.

The less developed showed just a tassel of blonde, brown, reddish, or other-colored hair above a green head-bulge, or perhaps the green husk opening enough to reveal pale forehead and tiny darting eyes.

In the more developed the sheath of the stem had split down the front and peeled back, like a bolero jacket or green dressing robe, half revealing a delectable torso, baby pink yet an anatomically perfect replica of some celebrated figure.

FOR as one studied these flower-girls, it became apparent that they were not some exotic genus unlinked to individual humanity. One began to recognize faces and forms.

Here were the opulent or sweetly up-tilted breasts of some reigning screen star. *There* was the profile of a celebrated society beauty, or winsome junior member of a royal family. A few of the more memorable Kittens-of-the-Month were represented, but on the whole the social trend was upward. Not every plant was unique, however. There were several groups of identicals, including three full blooms in a front

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row which resembled Erica Slyker just enough to make one realize they or their plant-ancestor must have been grown with the help of photos and exodermal tokens of her sister Alice.

A very few of the long-stemmed girls bulged with seeds. These had their eyes closed, but most of the rest were peering about, chiefly toward Tag.

And although they were armless they clearly had more than ocular powers of movement, for a small rustling went through the ranked flowers now, as if a tiny breeze were sifting through the subterranean hothouse, troubling the canopy leaves; stems twisted just a little toward Tag; minute lips parted and there was the faintest shrill sibilance in the air, as of voices almost too high to be sensed at all.

Tag took deep langorous breaths of the varied girl-scent, feeling utterly content.

This was the place where the world was perfect for him, he decided for the thousandth time: the place where girls were not big troublesome bounding meaty things with rights and ideas and desires, but fragile blooms with just enough consciousness and limited life to make them interesting; fragile blossoms, blooms to be potted and repotted, tenderly nurtured, watered and fertilized and sprayed, brought to the acme of perfection, and then carefully hand-pollinated and set to seed, or ruthlessly snapped off and extirpated forever as the whim took him.

Pinning up girls in a million-copy magazine was pretty good, admittedly. But potting them in a garden . . . oh, how much he owed to his Great-aunt Veronica and her patient largely-unappreciated research and her mimic-seeds! What stretches of bliss he'd enjoyed during the seven years since he'd chanced on the black spheroids in her effects and stumbled on their purpose!

ALMOST his sole regret was that he couldn't regrow his Great-aunt herself. He'd tried—he had a daguerreotype of her as a 17-year-old and a lock of her girl-hair—but it had turned out that the process wouldn't work for dead women. Else he'd have had not only his perpetually blooming row of "Veronicas," but his Cleopatras, Madam Dubarrys, Nell Gwyns, Lola Montezes, and Jean Harlows—granting he could locate authentic pictures and/or genuine exodermal tokens, even if only a pinch of ashes. But apparently for a girl-plant to develop properly it needed to "draw on" the living original girl in some obscure vampirish way, telepathic or sub-etheric, who could say?—since even his Great-aunt had had no wholly satisfactory theory.

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The effect on the girl whose seed had been planted with proper picture and token varied greatly. Frequently there was none at all, so far as Tag could discover. Sometimes she would be reported as confined to bed or sent to hospital with a mild undiagnosed fever or in a light (or occasionally heavy) coma, especially during the period of blooming. Such symptoms generally terminated, and the girl returned to her normal life, with the withering and/or seeding of her plant. If Tag continued to re-seed her, as in the case of Alice Slyker, there might be rumors of protracted depression together with periods of retreat in some mental hospital.

Once a Swedish beauty queen he'd terminated (with a hedge shears) had died the same night (decapitated in a traffic accident), but Tag was inclined to attribute that to coincidence. What the devil, he wasn't trying to work black magic or hurt anyone, he was only satisfying an aesthetic impulse, using tools supplied by a very high-minded old lady. No, he wasn't trying to hurt a soul.

Of course condign punishment, as now of the abominable Erica Slyker, was something else again! That thought stirred him from his delightful lethargy and he trotted to the potting table, past rows of Alices and Brigittes and Margarets and Sophias and a single Jacqueline.

He started grinning before he got there. His "Erica" had developed with commendable rapidity. Clearly Anselmo had remembered the vitamin and hormone supplements. Already the face was in full bloom and the bosom had begun to bulge nicely. The haughty archings of the minuscule eyebrows as she glared at him and the petulant poutings of the tiny lips were balm to his injured psyche—and as much so was the thought of her twisting and moaning now on some hard couch or hospital bed while doctors bent over her bafflingly; he'd asked one of his earlier victims about her coma and she'd told him it had been filled with horrid half-formed dreams of being buried alive and bound to a stake and subjected to nameless indignities.

"And serve you right, Slyker," he said now to the flower, lightly flicking one pale cheek with a fingernail.

THE resemblance was perfect. The eleven-looped hair and the inward-facing color print had done their work well.

But something was wrong: the second pot he'd planted had no photo tilted against it. Automatically he glanced to the floor and here was the manila envelope, where it must have slipped

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from under his elbow five days back. He stooped and drew from it the print of the off-Broadway red-head talent with the small white envelope still clipped to it containing the three green nail clippings.

What the devil had he buried with the second mimic seed?

His eyes came up over the edge of the potting table and he looked for the first time at the plant rising sturdy-stemmed from the second pot.

It was topped by a walnut-size replica of his own head, leaf-ruffed. The face, in full bloom even to the wide-based pointy beard, was staring at him anxiously and gaping its mouth, as if shouting an inaudibly shrill message.

His first impulse, an instant one, was to rip it out by the roots and stamp on it.

His second impulse, which was so violent it rocked him back on his heels and sent his clutching hands flying up into the air, was to nurse and protect and watch over the thing as if it were a hundred-thousand-gulden Dutch black tulip—at least!

Veils fell from his mind's eyes. He suddenly saw that only a blind idiot would have blithely attributed to coincidence the Swede's grisly traffic death on the same night he'd snipped her stem at the neck. No, he must cherish the Taggart-plant in every way! My God, what if a blight suddenly struck the garden?—some horrid creeping purple mold . . .

Or what if he went into a coma now? He'd no sooner thought that than he was blinking his eyes, taking deep breaths, slapping his cheeks hard, and rapidly stamping his right foot on the concrete. Clearly he'd almost gone into a coma a minute before, back at the secret panel. Probably only the high pitch of tension involved in putting *Kittens* to bed had saved him from blackout during the past several days.

The atmosphere of this damned place was soporific! Maybe he should flee to the Canadian North Woods with its clean bracing air—yes, but it puts you to sleep, they say . . .

And if he were away, people could get at the garden—get at the Taggart-plant! Kidnap it, hold it for ransom, torture it, take a great big shears and . . . He'd never really trusted Anselmo!

GRADUALLY sanity returned, especially when it struck him that his deep breathing, hyperventilating his lungs, was all by itself about to throw him into a faint.

He shifted his mind into gear and set it to work under a careful throttle. Dimly he could recall

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now tugging his beard in the moon-blue dark while the second mimic seed had still been in his fingers. Evidently he'd loosened a hair or two and then buried them along with the seed. His body bending over the pot and thereafter its close presence in the same building, had been the equivalent of a picture or more. In any case Great-aunt Veronica herself, according to her papers and notes, had never been certain whether the pictures or the exodermal tokens were the most important factors in the cultivation process.

THINKING about the thing this way, scientifically, began to put it into perspective for him and he grew calmer, though it remained most disturbing to realize that he had been absent-minded enough (or conceivably hypnotically influenced?) to pull such a trick.

Still, the thing was done, and nothing now remained but to see the Taggart-plant through its relatively brief flowering-span (that thought elicited from him a residual shiver) and then just let it wither away normally. Reasonable care should easily do the job. After all, who in the world now Great-aunt Veronica was dead knew more about mimic-plants than he? He would be his own best caretaker. As for coma, many girls never seemed to suffer it, even during the blooming period. Why should a strong man?

And, what the devil, didn't all truly great research doctors and physiologists try their serums on themselves? He was one of their lion breed now!

He looked down at the Taggart-plant, which—all shouting anxiety gone—returned him such a brash Satan's-grin that he felt greatly bucked up, positively exhilarated . . . to such a degree that for an instant, but an instant only, he imagined himself down there smirking up at his own moon-big face.

What the dickens, if that brave little guy could keep up his spirits, so could he!

Whistling, he fetched a small red can and carefully watered himself—and as an afterthought, Erica. It occurred to him that he might try an experiment in cross-pollenization when the stems were fully opened. Normally he self-pollenized all his flowers to keep strains true—girl-girl crosses tended toward mediocrity beauty-wise, he'd discovered by repeated experiments. And of course he wouldn't want to produce any true seeds of himself—he'd never feel safe if any such were in existence, no matter how tightly locked up. But his pollen on Erica's gynoecium—it was a tantalizingly attractive thought!

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IN his bemused high spirits he even watered the nameless little plant growing in the pot between his and Erica's, but nearer his own. There was a sharp *bzz!* He dropped the red watering can. Damn that phone, he thought as he stooped and righted the trickling can. It had no right to sound so much like a bee coming in for the kill. He must have the tone altered at once—would have had it altered before, except he'd been reluctant to admit his fear of bees was so great.

But that was silly. Bees were his great ineradicable dread, and he might as well face up to it, just as he'd faced up now to the existence of the Taggart-plant. Why, if it weren't for his dread of bees, he'd have long ago tried experiments in insect pollenization. It was tittilating to think of bees crawling all over his flower-girls, buzzing lazily from one of the next.

But who the devil could be calling him here? Not more than a dozen people knew this number—the last person he'd given it to had been the President.

A charming voice said, "Erica Slyker here. Hello, Taggart-blaggart - waggart - haggart - sleep - sleep-sleep! Now that I've given you the cue we agreed on, you will answer any question I ask. You will do whatever I tell you. Can you hear me clearly?"

"Yes, I can," he replied in a singsong voice.

"Good. You're in the garden?"

"Yes, I am."

"Excellent. Place a chair by the table so you can watch both our plants. Then sit down in it."

He managed to face the chair away from the table, but it turned out this only meant he had to straddle it, resting his forearms and the phone on its back.

"You're sitting in the chair watching our plants? How's the vamp doing?"

Obediently Tag focused on the little plant next his own, only now learning what it was. He'd planted two of those horrors six years ago and decided never again—the tendrils of the one of them had strangled a promising Gina, while those of the other had whipped out and caught a litttle finger he'd brought incautiously close, inflicting tiny but nasty wounds with their microscopic suckers.

"It is doing quite well," he reported into the phone. "The forehead is showing and I can count six . . . no, seventeen pale red tendrils. They are about an inch long and have begun to wave a little."

"Bravo! Keep watching that plant too. Now hang up the phone and await further instructions."

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TAGGART ADAMS obeyed and then Eternity set in for him. An eternity the passing of whose centuries were marked by calls from Erica only to repeat the "blag-wag-hag" formula, whose millennia were each signalized by an additional inch-growth of the red tendrils of the vamp.

After about thirty-five hundred years the face of the vamp became fully visible. As he'd long since guessed from the color on the tendrils, it was that of the off-Broadway red-head talent—evidently the picture and the three green nail parings had been able to do their work from the floor, as being the nearest picture-and-tokens available and otherwise unoccupied.

She had a great talent for the evil eye, Tag decided after a thousand years of being glared at. And for writhing her lips back from her tiny white fangs. And for waving suggestively close to the Taggart-plant those wire-worm tendrils that arched around her face like the hair of a Medusa.

Meanwhile the Erica and the Taggart were developing their proper bulges and finally splitting their green stem-sheathes down the front: the slowest and least titillating strip-tease in the universe.

The Erica looked back at him with a contempt that only became more smiling as the ages passed.

The Taggart, on the other hand, grimaced and grinned and winked its left eye at him unceasingly. Tag became dully infuriated with the little idiot's irrationally high spirits—and bored, horribly bored. If that was the way he'd looked all his life to other people . . .

He felt the ache of thirst and the sickness of hunger, but they were dulled by a titanic listlessness.

A million times he told himself that a man couldn't be held hypnotized like this against his will, surely not after a one-session indoctrination into which he'd somehow been tricked by a mere abominable girl. Not one of the most powerful men in the world, not the sex-puppet master, not the publisher of *Kittens*, not Veronica's Grand-nephew, not the Lord of Kitten Kastle, not the girl-gardener . . .

A million times a little voice from a dark high corner of his mind replied only, "Blag-wag-hag."

Thrice there were "nights" lasting for many centuries.

AFTER twelve thousand years he heard the secret panel open and footsteps drag up the aisle. Someone stooped and retrieved the red watering can. It was Anselmo, he could tell from

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the corner of his eye—no mistaking that hand like a bleached ham, that face big as that of a white horse, for in addition to being a submoronic deafmute, the ancient Sicilian had acromegaly.

Tag tried to shout, to whisper, to beckon with a finger, just to lift one—to no avail. Without even a single curious glance toward his employer, so far as Tag could tell, Anselmo went about his chores.

For decades and scores of years his big shoes scraped the concrete and there came the periodic gush of the tap as he patiently watered and fertilized and sprayed. Twice the phone *bzzed* for a repitition of the inevitable formula, but there was no alteration in the sound of Anselmo's movements. Both times Tag tried to drop the phone on the floor—and only set it the more carefully back.

A third time the phone *bzzed* —much sooner than the once-a-century rhythm called for. A brisk grating voice said, "Tag? George. All ready to pop those lions, boy? Rhodesia's waiting for us." To Tag's horror all he could say was, "No, thanks," and all he could do was hang up.

Finally Anselmo arrived at the potting table and began methodically to care for the three plants there, insensible to Tag's mental screams, even when Anselmo's sprinkling reawakened Tag's searing thirst and they became the inward shriek, "For the love of God, pour some of that in my mouth!"

Anselmo finished with the Erica, the vamp (a bit cautious with his huge hands there as they moved around the foot-long tendrils), and finally the Taggart. Only then did his behavior alter. He stood ox-still and stared for an interminable time at the smirking walnut-head of the Taggart. Hope rekindled in Tag.

Then Anselmo turned and stared for almost an equally long period at his life-size employer. Tag's hope flamed. If only there were some readable expression in that white face big as a washbowl . . .

Then Anselmo looked back at the walnut-head, puzzledly shook his own in three wide horse-like swings, shrugged his sloping shoulders, and dragged off down the aisle. The secret door opened, then closed behind him. A trapdoor opened in the corridor and Anselmo plummeted into the hottest room in hell—in Tag's imagination.

A mere thousand years and ten phone-calls later, Erica added, "I know the garden's under the pool. How do I get in?"

Tag focussed his will and thought, "Sooner than tell you, I'd see myself in Hell. I'd become a pauper. You're the evil woman

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my Great-aunt Veronica always warned me against. You're the Witch Queen. No."

What he said into the phone was, "Turn right at the foot of the main staircase. The seventh vertical molding to your right. The seventh rosette from the floor. Press three-one."

"Thanks. I won't be long. Incidentally, you are in Hell and there is no pauper-alternative. Oh, by the way, it's about time you were getting out of that body—it won't live much longer, even with you in it. Don't look at the me-plant any more, don't look at the vamp, just look at the you-plant . . . and project . . . project . . . project . . ."

TAG complied. After a century the walnut-head began to bob and smirk in exact time with his own blinking. Then suddenly it grew moon-huge. Looking down, Tag saw that he had grown a large green ruff around his neck.

His first reaction to his realization that he was now in the Taggart-plant was to try and project himself back into his rightful body.

One glance at it changed his mind. That gray-faced elephantine hulk, that moon-topped mountain, looked *dead.*

This tentative information didn't depress him perhaps as much as it should have. He felt a vivification, an unreasoning cockiness, a confidence in his own powers, although he could only move his head and wriggle his torso a bit. Perhaps it was because he was no longer thirsty —Anselmo had watered well and cool moisture pervaded his every tissue.

Also, time had speeded up for him again—minutes no longer dragged like years.

Or perhaps his exhilaration was due to his increased sensitivity. Air-eddies intangible before now rippled against his bare flesh like brook water. A drifting bit of lint bumped him like a paper boat. Colors were brighter —he could see with the fresh-washed vision of a child. Odors were a symphony, chiefly of girl-scents, which he realized he had never properly appreciated before; now he could pick out each instrument in the orchestra.

And he could hear with exquisite precision and clarity. Why, he could even hear what the flower-girls were saying!

"We hate you, Tag Adams, we loathe and despise you," they were chanting, occasionally varying it with obscenities in several languages.

His chest swelled. Why, it was a kind of hymn. No wonder the little guy had acted so happy. Where was that little guy now, anyhow? Absorbed in his own larger consciousness? No mat-

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ter, just listen . . . now what was that French girl calling him. . . ?

"Enjoy it while you can," the Erica-plant cut in sweetly.

"Shut up!" he snapped, swiveling his head toward her. My, my, she certainly was as handsomely constructed as he'd guessed she'd be when she'd first entered his office—he decided with an appreciative, quite involuntary whistle.

"How gallant," the Erica-plant replied with a shrug. "Give him a hug for me, Red."

THE vamp, far more supple-stemmed than the mimics, thrust forward between them. The Medusa-face mopped and mowed. The eyes glared white-circled. The white fangs clicked and skirred. And then the inch-thick living tendrils whipped around him until they were like a red-barred cage, their tips not quite touching him, until one slowly dipped and drew itself stingingly across his chest . . .

"Cut it short, Red," the Erica-plant commanded.

There was a distant grating noise. The red tendrils whipped away. The grating noise continued.

The secret panel was opening. Then the tramp of giant footsteps—Tag could feel their almost painful vibrations coming up from the concrete through the table and his pot and his earth.

Erica Slyker had entered the room: a girl as tall as a pine tree, bigger than a dinosaur to Tag, a colossal Witch Queen.

She was wearing a platinum mink coat over her pearl-worked, pearl-gray suit. To the left shoulder of her coat was pinned a big spray of white funeral lilies.

Under her left elbow she carried a small cubical white box, big as a piano crate to Tag. It hummed, as though there were several electric motors running inside it.

Halfway down the aisle she stopped to look at the three Alices.

"Save us, save us!" all the flower girls called to her.

She slowly and rather sadly shook her head. Then she jerked the three Alices screaming out of their pots.

"Kill or cure, my dear," she said in a voice that to Tag was like thunder. "Anything's better than the state you're in."

She stooped, swinging the three still-screaming Alices high in the air and smashed them against the concrete with a heavy thud, the vibrations from which made Tag wince, and left them there.

All the flower-girls grew silent. The pot-jarring footsteps resumed. Erica set down the white box on the potting table

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and the electric motors added their different but painful vibrations to the others. Tag writhed. He was discovering why his flower-girls had never liked hi-fi the nights he'd played it to them hour after hour, full blast. Erica bent toward him. It was like a face leaning down out of Mt. Rushmore.

"It's not so much fun being a sensitive plant, is it, Mr. Adams?" she rumbled slowly.

"May my Great-aunt torture you in Hell!" Tag squeaked.

"You'll find Erica in Veronica," she replied cryptically. Then she slowly unwound a long blue-black hair from around the ear of his corpse. She dangled it in front of him and said, "There are many variants of the hair formula, Mr. Adams—and more than one way of applying an exodermal token."

Then she dug her fingers into the pot of her own plant, carefully loosened its roots, gently shook them out and wrapped them in a wet handkerchief, then tucked and fastened the she-flower in the center of her spray of lilies.

Then she looked at Tag across the white box.

"The Witch Gods do not love you, Mr. Adams," she whispered in a voice like distant thunder.

She took the cover off the box. A black bee, yellow-striped and big as a half-grown kitten, crawled out and up on to the rim.

"You signed your will and your death-warrant, you know, Mr. Adams," she continued, "within an hour of our meeting in your office. Signed them in more senses than one."

WITH the *bzzz* of a power lawnmower the bee took off and came circling widely around Tag.

"After all, you've had a long life," Erica went on. "About fourteen thousand years, wouldn't you say?—even if most of them were spent here during the last few days."

Tiny tears of horror trickled down Tag's face as he craned and craned his neck. He'd oftened wondered exactly what the drops of dew on the flower-girls' cheeks had meant.

"I'll be leaving soon, Mr. Adams," Erica said. "You'll have the place to yourself. The lock will be jammed. Anselmo will assume you've set it against him. I'm going to leave the sunlight turned on full—it's the kindest thing I can do for the others."

The bee lit on Tag's shoulder like a six-legged live helicopter. It stank acidly. Of the million screams inside him he dared not utter one.

"Don't be frightened," Erica rumbled. "Bees don't sting flowers—if they're quiet. And the scent of a male plant happens to

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be irresistible to these bees."

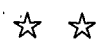
Two more bees climbed to the rim and took off and came circling.

"It's really an honor to you, Mr. Adams," she continued. "Judging from your magazine, it's what you've always wanted to have happen. It should be an exquisite fate, from your point of view."

More bees took off. A second landed on Tag's neck. The first walked slowly down his chest, its sticky hair-fringed feet pricking and tickling almost unbearably, its sting wagging in his face.

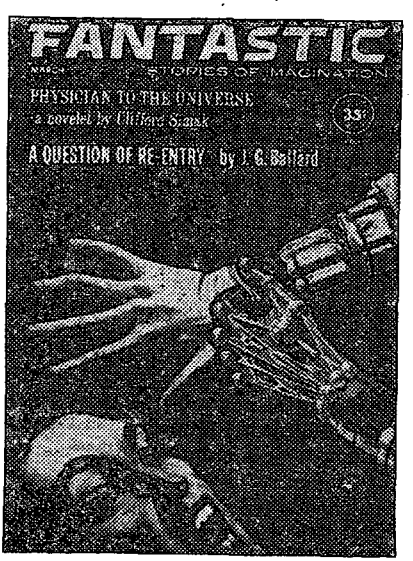
"Yes," she explained, standing up, "the bees are merely going to carry your pollen to all these beautiful girls." She spread her arms wide, then leaned forward and finished, "But before they can carry your pollen, Mr. Adams, they have to collect it."

THE END



COMING NEXT MONTH

Clifford Simak's newest novelet, *Physician to the Universe,* is the feature in March FANTASTIC. Accompanied by a cover illo *(r.)* by artist Jack Gaughan, Simak's story is set in a future when every man is required to be healthy and sanitary—and the Swamp awaits the rest!



The prolific new pro, **Roger Zelazny,** is represented with his first novelet, *Nine Starships Waiting.* And **J. G. Ballard** contrasts space exploration with savage superstitions in *A Question of Re-Entry.*

PLUS—short stories, and our usual features. Be sure to get your copy of the March FANTASTIC on sale February 19.

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By J. G. WARNER

The hold that H. P. Lovecraft exerts from beyond the grave on followers of fantasy seems to grow stronger through the years. This story, by a New Orleans newspaperman, grew out of his admiration for Lovecraft, and his determination to keep alive the HPL style by using it in fanciful letters to his friends. This was the only letter written. But it weaves a spell worthy of the master.

Dear Jim,

I am sending this by special delivery so it should get to you by the day after tomorrow. I shall follow it by no more than a day. You must take me in for a time until I get my bearings, and can determine on which side of the balance my mind lies.

I know you would receive me without so much as a preparing letter. I am writing this, rather, to keep my own sanity, which has been pushed to the brink by the final horror that has just befallen me. You are the only person I know who would even listen to such a story as I have to tell. You must believe it and help me escape. You can, if anyone or anything can. But I doubt whether I can get away, ultimately.

You remember Tessier, the fat old furniture dealer. It all began with him. He drank a lot, you know, and talked pretty wildly; you seemed rather interested in him, although it seemed to me that his queer hints and insinuations were only the product of an oversensitive imagination nurtured in New Orleans. Well, Tessier remarked that he knew a lot about things you were interested in—your folklore and mythology, of course—after you left last summer. He never would say just what, but kept telling me to wait. I must say that he got me pretty interested.

Two days ago he called me. He was drunk, worse than usual. It was the last night of Mardi Gras, but I hadn't made any plans, and he insisted that I come to his store. He said that he was finally ready to show me the secret he had been talking about, and kept apologizing and bemoaning the fact that you weren't here. Thank God you weren't.

Well, since I really hadn't

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anything to do, and it would give me a chance to get rid of Tessier and his dark mutterings, I conceded. I left the apartment and started fighting my way through the wild carnival crowds. It was not more than five blocks from my apartment to Tessier's on Royal, but it took me more than half an hour to get there.

You've never seen the French Quarter on a carnival night, Jim. It's mad; the streets are roped off, crowds so thick you can hardly move. Drunks lurch into you and women tug your sleeve—it's really rather unpleasant unless you're in the mood, and I wasn't. The din was deafening, and the old wrought galleries were sagging beneath the weight of the celebrants dancing on them. The streets are so narrow that the people on the galleries could nearly join hands across the packed street. It was terribly hot and muggy, and a rather unpleasant smell was coming off the Mississippi. It's only a few blocks from Royal, you know, and when the Quarter isn't so noisy you can hear the cow-like lowing of the ships' horns.

I WAS in a decidedly foul mood when I finally got to Tessier's pretentious antique furniture store. You were never there, were you? It's the usual thing for the Rue Royal—lots of glass with all those polished gold buckets and vulgar stone statues piled in careless disarray. The old fool was waiting inside under a little porcelain lamp and when he saw me at the door, he waddled to unlock it.

He was almost overpoweringly drunk, and had the air of a man about to uncover the secrets of the universe. I was suddenly beset by an overwhelming urge to turn around and go home; but before I could act he had bolted the door and was leading me to the rear of his shop.

Tessier looked even worse under the lamp, surrounded by all those ominous big stone nymphs and birds and ancient chairs. A gross, revolting soapstone Buddha two feet high peered down from a filing cabinet at us with a vapidly inscrutable expression. The old antique seller was in really bad shape. He hadn't even attempted to shave for a couple of days and there was a yellow tinge under the normal sickly grayish cast of his hog-jowled face. He acted alternately frightened and excited as he pulled me into a dimly lit back room, like a child hugging itself in some pleasureable yet dreaded anticipation.

"This is the night—the night, you know," he tittered, and began fumbling into some sort of closet. I didn't think this sort of statement was worth an answer, so after a moment he went on.

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"You'll find a lot of things to startle you about New Orleans tonight, Paul. You'd never believe it if I told you, and you'd probably have babbled it, so that's why I didn't tell you until tonight, so you can see for yourself.

"But you must never speak to anyone of what you will see down there tonight. Never. You'll see what I mean. God, if they should ever learn I brought you. . . ."

I was growing impatient. "What's all this about, Tessier? And what's that?" He had brought two strange, musty-looking dun-colored robes with loose cowls from the closet.

"Put it on," he said, handing one of the mildewed things to me.

"Paul, you won't believe this until you see it, but I'll tell you now, because we can't talk, not even whisper, once we get there. Remember that. They might notice you.

THE French Quarter is two centuries or more old, you know. There's a hundred blocks of it now but you only know half of it. The rest of it's down there he said, almost shouting, and pointing at his feet. "Only about fifty people know this, and you'll be surprised who they are.

"Yes, there's something down there, under these crumbling buildings and banquettes that have been here since white men were here. But it's been down there long before that, long before there was a Vieux Carre, and probably even before there were Indians. It's probably been there forever.

"You didn't think the old town was built here, in the middle of a God-forsaken swamp, for nothing, did you? Not when it's a lot better for a townsite a little farther up the river.

"We all go down there, once a year, the last night of carnival. Our fathers did, and their fathers before them, and theirs, and God knows who else before that. I don't know why we go down there now, really, but we do, and when you see who else goes down, maybe you'll think it's gotten us results. You'll see some pretty rough things, Paul, and I hope you won't give yourself away."

"For God's sake, man, what are you talking about?" I demanded, thoroughly disgusted now. "What's down there?"

"Catacombs," he croaked. "Miles of them. Nobody's been through them all, that we know of, and we don't know how far or how deep they go, but they seem to cover all the Quarter—underneath."

Well, Jim, this was the first concrete statement of the night, and you'll understand that it was enough to make me pull on the

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evil-smelling old robe and pull the cowl over my head, as Tessier did.

"It's nearly time now. We must go, and remember, whatever you do, don't say a word once we step out this door. Keep absolutely quiet and don't stare. If anybody notices you aren't one of us, God help me . . . and you."

WITH that, he doused the lights and opened a rear door. The blackness of the night made it seem nearly light within the store. Tessier looked up at me and in the dimness at the door his disgusting face was almost pitiful with a fearfulness that was beginning to pervade it. I think he was starting to wish he hadn't brought me, and I was about to offer to leave, when an overpowering stench of whiskey floated into my nostrils, gagging me, and I pushed him out the door.

We were in a small, rundown courtyard, piled around with boxes and crates and old packing and stuffing. Tessier tugged at the flowing sleeve of my cassock and I started after him through the blackness.

We passed out through the little courtyard and into a long, high-walled passageway. The din of the celebration burst afresh into my ears, and above the walls and the rooftops of the old town we were creeping through, the lights offered an eerie glow. Raucous, obscene and wildly incongruous music shrieked at us from the nearby Bourbon Street dives as we walked silently through the deserted, musty outdoor corridor. The walk led to an old wooden door, and through that we went into another courtyard. It was pitch black at eye-level but I could hear the bubbling of a fountain nearby over the roar of the crowds in the streets outside.

Tessier opened a protesting door and we were on a side street, Conti, I think it was. It is the last place-memory I have of that night. Nobody took notice of us, with more strangely costumed figures to be seen anywhere during Mardi Gras, and we slipped across the street and into another doorway.

We didn't, I don't think, cross another street. But it seems that Tessier, growing surprisingly steadier in that oppressively hot, dank air, led me through an endless series of courtyards, passages, plank doors and private alleys until I was perfectly lost. I guess we must have crossed a street somewhere. I remember I never lost sight of the dim glow above the crumbling rooftops, and I could always hear the laughing, milling crowds in the streets.

It seemed we had been threading our way through those an-

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cient galleried courtyards for more than half an hour when Tessier suddenly pushed open a door and only blackness looked out. We went in and he shut the door and for long moments I couldn't see a thing. Then, just as I was growing accustomed to the utter darkness, the door opened again and three more hooded and cowled figures slunk in.

As best I could tell, Jim, the place was an old slave-quarters; it had only one big room, and another small floor above; but we were there only long enough for Tessier to light a soaked rag on the end of a club-like piece of wood and he was bearing one of those torches so beloved of the pulp magazine artists.

Then he walked to the middle of the room and began tugging at a ring on the floor. One of the three strangers went to help him. I glanced around enough to see that the place was falling apart, the two windows boarded up.

THEN Tessier was tugging at my sleeve. The other three had already gone down the hole that their efforts had opened. Now Tessier was ready to descend into the square-shaped hole in the brick floor. There wasn't a ladder there. Rather, there were steps, hewn and placed into the immemorially soggy ground. Tessier went down and motioned for me to pull the door shut above me as I followed. And I was groping for the lid to the trap when I noticed that I could no longer hear the carnival revelers. Then I pulled the trap door shut above me and it clanged into place with a startling boom that was answered by an echo from the bowels of the earth.

I had never known it before, but apparently I suffer from claustrophobia. No doubt it was enhanced by the utter weirdness of everything I had been doing and everything I had seen for the past hour; but when the door shut over my head and I looked down at the fire-lit, endless steps running into the worm-riddled earth, an icy chill settled behind my forehead and I had to fight off the advance guard of panic.

The three persons that had descended before us were already out of sight, but I fancied I could hear footsteps echoing back through that terrible mouldy tunnel. The slightest noise produced unerringly somber results in that nether world.

Tessier was pulling at me again, and we began the descent. His torch cast shadows about us. I could see that the walls of the sharply declining hole were earthen; it was not shorn up in any manner that I could discern. The steps were of stone, worn unaccountably

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smooth at the edges, since Tessier told me this eerie pilgrimage was made only once a year, on the last day of carnival. I wondered how this seemingly small amount of stone could produce such perfect echoes.

Down and down we went, Jim, until my legs were about to give out. Tessier was clutching at the earth, and now we had gone so far down that it was fairly oozing with slime and wetness, and revolting green slime on the steps made the descent treacherous. Every so often we passed holes nearly a foot large in the walls, and they reminded me of the little worm passages in a spadeful of upturned earth.

The indescribably foul odor that seemed almost to ooze visibly from the black earthen walls was becoming unbearable and I feared I would fall on the slippery steps and retch when the steps suddenly halted and Tessier's torch flared out in a large, high ceilinged earth chamber.

THE chamber was like an overturned bowl, and must have been twenty feet high at its peak, and probably twenty feet across. It was like an eldritch fearsome vestibule, for six black openings had been cut into the circular walls. Tessier walked to the center of the earthen room and looked about, a puzzled expression on his fat features, while great drops of moisture oozed from the blackish-yellow ceiling and dripped on his mouldering cassock. Then he nodded to himself and started into one of the six openings, beckoning me to follow with a jerk of his flaming torch.

We entered the slightly round door and I found myself peering down an almost—as far as I could tell from Tessier's torch—illimitable catacomb. The old fool had been speaking the truth. The French Quarter was undermined with these sinister dank tunnels, although I have no idea how far below the gay carnival crowds we were.

Tessier, apparently sober now and growing increasingly agitated, waddled as briskly as he could down the slightly concave floor of the round catacomb. I found it hardly high enough to stand erect, and began walking with a stoop, but even so something wet and wholly loathsome seeped through the cowl into my hair and down my face occasionally.

The catacomb wasn't as long as I must have thought, for we hadn't walked long before some sort of noise seemed to float to our ears over the drum-like beats of our footsteps. The stone had stopped with the steps, and all about us was bloated earth now, but still those perfect reproductions of every sound struck our

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ears like mocking laughter. Strange growths tugged at my cowl and my head was soggy with clinging lumps of swollen dirt as we forged on; soon the cowl was pushed back and my hair was growing matted with that unnameable excretion of the earth that dripped on it.

All the time the buzzing grew louder, and soon I seemed to detect a glow of light far down the catacomb we were following, far beyond the feeble reach of Tessier's faggot. Still we kept on that soggy path in the tunnel, although at intervals of about twenty paces new catacombs yawned blackly at us from either side; it is a wonder we were not lost forever in that murky awfulness below New Orleans. Better perhaps for me that we had been.

The noise grew louder, and the glow brighter, and my fear, thrust back by ever-present conscious effort, surged back in a great wave when from a side-catacomb belched a soggy thump as I passed; a thump almost inaudible, giving the impression of fathomless distance. I nearly cried out, but Tessier did not falter; apparently the growing growl from ahead had drowned that awful flopping sound from his ears.

I was staggering, nearly sick with a fear that I could hardly hold in my stomach, when the end of the catacomb appeared and I saw a milling crowd of the cowled figures. Thirty more paces to the blazingly-lighted door and I almost fainted when I saw black hands bigger than a man reaching down for the hooded forms.

A PARALYZING, sickening horror gripped me when I saw those two great ebony hands cupping down as if to reach under the crowd of tan-robed men, but in another instant I realized that those gruesome claws were part of a terrible titan statue that hovered like a monstrous demon of death over the illimitable chamber and its occupants. As the terrible fright poured from me like an outgoing tide, leaving me weak and queasy, I gazed awestruck at that chamber, at the great black figure that dominated it—that was it, almost, and the sinister group gathered under the fearful shadow of the giant.

The chamber was so vast that the torches held on poles not far from the mouth of the catacomb in which we stood, and ranging far back until they were only little evil stars, seemed to illuminate only fractions of it. Jim, it seemed to me to cover more than a square mile; of course I can't be sure since I couldn't see the far reaches of the dome-shaped, although oblong, earthen grotto,

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and my mental state then was admittedly wretched.

In the center, under that breathtaking, all-encompassing figure, stood about fifty persons, dressed like Tessier and me. When I saw some of their faces, I could hardly believe it, just as Tessier had warned. The very contemporary fathers of the city of New Orleans stood there, looking rather ridiculous, their uncomfortably smiling faces peering from the shadows of their cowls.

I will not name the men I saw; great politicians, whose reputations were not of the highest but certainly spoke of nothing like this; financial and shipping barons; university heads—you'd really be shocked there, Jim—mingling with sinister-visaged, ill-reputed but vaguely affluent dwellers of the French Quarter, about whose lives a strange aura of mystery had been attached in that sane world somewhere above us.

They were talking among one another, somewhat self-consciously it seemed, and their faces bore rather embarrassed grins, as if they didn't want to be there, saw no reason for it, and felt silly. Apparently, Jim, they had no conception of what that eyeless thing was that stooped high above them.

The titan stone statue had its feet somewhere in the black recesses of the vast chamber, an egg-shaped auditorium about two hundred feet high at its apex, which was almost directly above us. There at the crown was that bloated head, yet the knee of that great black figure was dimly visible in the shadows, far, far away, slightly bent. The other knee was invisible in the blackness. Its arms were bowed and outstretched downward, bent at the elbows, and appeared about to scoop up us all. The whole great figure gave the impression of a vast black demon hunter, running in city-spanning strides, snatching up its victims in its black, slime-dripping paws.

There above us, Jim, bore down that head for which you have searched the world over; I recognized it from your talks, although neither your words nor mine could describe its blank awfulness. You hunted for years to no avail, but I God help me, found it.

HIGH above us, yet it must have been a hundred yards across, was a head without a face; a great, ebony head with no features save long, pointed ears almost like wings.

Hurtling over us in his slime-dripping foulness was the Mighty Messenger, the Crawling Chaos from the blackness below the nighted pyramids. Forgotten for centuries upon centuries,

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buried with civilizations older than man, here he was below the heart of New Orleans, and these great men were vapid fools beneath him, they who would have fled screaming had they known what that magnificently wrought stone collossus represented.

It was set into the bowels of the earth, only a giant bas relief, and it seemed to nearly cover all of the great chamber's ceiling and part of its sides.

My eyes caught, over the heads of the milling crowd beneath the statue, stone steps rising out of the foul earth and leading to a slimy altar between the outstretched hands of the black god.

My senses still reel when I think of that sight—the flickering torches lighting the end of the vast egglike chamber with its sloping walls hewn from the dirt, and that hideous black giant loping bestially out of the black reaches of the chamber, faceless, reaching impersonally out for us.

Tessier nudged me back to what remained of my senses. I looked down at him and he bore an abjectly fearful, pleading expression. His fat little face conveyed to me perfectly the idea that if it should be discovered that an outsider was in this great dank chamber of horrors, neither of us would ever see the daylight world again.

We joined the group of men moving about the wet stone altar, men who should have been leading the gay Mardi Gras revels somewhere above us instead of lurking furtively under flickering torches in this huge subterranean chamber.

AS far as the eye could follow the walls of the chamber, more catacombs opened, so many I could not begin to count them. In a moment of startling lucidity, I wondered whether I should ever feel safe again in the French Quarter, or all of New Orleans for that matter, knowing the vast emptiness that lay beneath its crust. The remembrance of this thought now makes me want to scream.

The voices of the crowd, gathered round the altar, seemed by the strange acoustics of that accursed nether world to come from everywhere, from even the very unseen feet of the thing that hovered above. Drops of moisture, falling as if from the sky, plopped with revolting little thuds upon us. I stood among the hooded visitors to the depths, and tried to make myself inconspicuous. They seemed to be waiting for something, and the babble swelled when a lone hooded figure came out of the entryway catacomb with a bulky package beneath his arm, wrapped in coarse brown paper.

The man was one of New Orleans' leading morticians. Ap-

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parently, whatever he had brought in the package was what had been awaited, for the voices died and perfect silence filled the chamber, except for the plops falling from the great ceiling above. Gathering his robes about him, he started up the wide slippery flight of stairs to the altar, and in the dancing light of the torches the fingers of the black thing seemed to twitch.

He placed the package on the altar and began a high, wailing sort of song-chant. I could make out nothing of what he said, and it seemed to be repeated almost simultaneously everywhere in the vast sunken room. I watched with a sick dread as his hands began to fumble with the knots in the shop cord that held the package together.

The paper fell open and as I strained morbidly to see what was between those titanic black hands, the horror descended upon me.

A muffled roar welled up from the far reaches of the blasted cavern, from the feet of the Mighty Messenger, and grew louder and louder like a vast bowling ball rumbling down a giant's alley toward cowering ten-pins. The faces of the crowd whitened and the last thing I saw was the mortician with his hands wildly outstretched; then a colossal blast of wind blew me from my feet and plunged the great cavern into the blackness of bottomless hell.

I seemed to fall into the very abyss of terror, terror so great that saliva choked me and I clutched myself into a quivering, mindless ball there on the foul dank floor. The coldness of death gripped my brain and I know not how long I lay there trembling and drooling like a stricken idiot.

WHEN thought returned to me the great cave was soundless. I dared not open my eyes for a wild fear of what might be before them. Slowly I relaxed my aching muscles and listened for some sound, something. But there was nothing—nothing at all where there had been fifty people. Even the incessant drip from the ceiling far above me was no more. Then panic came surging back—where was I? Was I still in the cavern? How long had abject terror held me senseless.

Timidly I made an effort to open my eyes. I couldn't at first—the very muscles seemed locked. But then, slowly, they seemed to part; it felt like an infinity. Then they must have been open, but I saw nothing. Only blackness.

My first thought was blindness. I moved my hand until it was before my face, but I could see nothing. I could see no more with my eyes open than I could with them closed.

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The noise of rising from that miserable floor sounded like the clash of doom in the utter silence, but nothing touched me. I took a step. Nothing happened—only the sound of the footfall. It seemed like one step was taken everywhere in that great cave. I looked up where I had last seen that faceless evil, but here was only blackness, the blackness of the pit.

I began stepping forward into the blackness, gingerly, my hands in front of me like a blind man. Maybe I was blind. I had no matches, no way to make a light to try to see. But then my hands touched slimy stone and I knew at least that I was still in the great chamber, at the foot of the altar between the hands of the giant. I recoiled from that thing and remembrance of the package on the altar.

I turned, gropingly. I could not even think of what had happened to the others—to Tessier, who had brought a stranger into their midst. I began walking toward the wall upon which the entry catacomb opened—or toward where I thought it was. Then I remembered dismally that the catacomb to the slave quarters in the old town was only one of seemingly hundreds that opened into the chamber, and that I should probably die of hunger before I could even explore part of the first one I found.

But I kept walking, growing more bold in my steps as I grew used to utter blackness, keeping one hand before me. The hand gouged into the pulpy wall, and I sidled to my right, feeling all the while for an opening. Then my hand hit an empty spot—I felt gingerly around for the roof of the catacomb and jerked my hand away in disgust when I realized it was in one of those evil foot-wide holes.

I KEPT going, and the next pocket my hand found proved to be a catacomb. Whether it was the one to the surface, or whether there were others which also led to the surface I could not know. I entered.

After I had gone a few steps, I noticed that the sounds of my footsteps were more normal in the close confines of the tunnel than they had been in that time-eroded chamber. Then my head, the cowl fallen from it, slid into the roof of the catacomb and furrowed into that repulsive slimy mud. I began to walk with a slight stoop.

The catacomb seemed to take no curves, or at least they were very gradual ones, for only occasionally did I seem to stagger into the wall and recoil from its shocking pulpiness. I do not know how long I must have walked—all thoughts of time were far from my grasp—before

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it seemed that sight was dimly returning, faintly and blueishly.

A pale blue gas seemed to escape weakly from the moss-ridden walls of that infernal passageway, and I could see very dimly, not close at hand, but at a distance of many paces. The sight was limited to a faint recognition of the slightly tubular outlines of the benighted subterranean pathway.

On and on I went, and in the mouldy coolness I grew calmer, and it seemed that the drippings from the ceiling that plagued our entry were not to be found in this tunnel. But the abysmal stench of the first one, a smell of things eon-dead and decaying, like the river of time suddenly run dry, clung all about me, and breathing was a laborious thing.

As I walked, I seemed to become aware of a sense of tension, of cosmic apprehension, as though the catacombs were holding their breath. So strongly did this feeling grip me that I almost unconsciously began to hold my breath, even more than the foul odor made necessary. I held my breath as I walked, then expended it and drew a new lungful like a child playing at hide-and-go-seek. And then I caught myself walking along with catlike steps, almost on my toes. I found myself listening with all my senses, joining the catacombs in their brooding alertness.

I tiptoed drunkenly down that ghastly tunnel, straining my ears as if I were trying to hear the expectancy of the walls. I jumped and rammed my head into the slimy soft roof when I trod on something that crunched under my foot. I didn't shout, but I stared to run, and then the noise of my running frightened me worse than ever, so I gripped myself and resumed walking. I looked over my shoulder, timidly, apprehensively, into the blue light, now glimmering about where I had been when I walked on that thing that crunched. But all I could see was something small which reflected the blue light a fraction brighter than the floor.

AND as I walked, my heart pumping loudly, I could almost hear it too. I listened. I listened because the walls and the ceiling and the floor of that earthen catacomb were listening with a malign expectancy. They were waiting and listening for something; the very air about me seemed alive.

Then it came.

I felt it first. The earth was trembling around me—above me, at my side, but mainly under my feet. It was trembling like the skin of a slowly-beaten drum. As I stood rooted with the now familiar sick fear caressing me, I expected the walls to begin crum-

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bling. It began slightly, ever so slightly, but even then it seemed hideous because the very catacomb itself seemed to tense and draw up. The booming rhythmic vibrations increased, and increased, and then I heard it and screamed.

It sounded at first like the distant throbbing of a drum, but when it grew a little louder I knew what it was, and it was worse than what I had feared. A wave of cosmic terror shot through my body at the sound of those obscene loping footsteps, the footsteps of a hunting beast.

I fought the terror that was clutching at my brain and stiffened and felt the cool sucking mud at the top of my head. The mud carried the vibrations of those awful padding footfalls that grew louder and the vibrations grew stronger.

I know only this, Jim, and I knew it as I stood there trembling with an ague of terror. No sane, living man ever saw the thing that was hurrying down that catacomb after me. There weren't two feet, there were four. And they didn't run in the greyhound gallop of two and two.

No, each of those unnameable paws came down in turn—one . . . two . . . three . . . four . . . one . . . two . . . three . . . four, and the space between the shock of the footsteps as they grew near was too damnably far apart. And as it came closer, that mind-blasting, space eating loping, like that of some fiend-wrought wolf of hell, the very catacomb around me bounced and trembled and squished, and the noise of that hunting creature's pads was like muffled cannon's roar. And then came the thought that sent me reeling, screaming like a stricken animal into a panicked flight.

What manner of thing, star-sent or earth-begotten, could make such dreadfully loud footsteps and cause the very earth to tremble, and still be small enough to course through a tunnel in which I could not stand erect?

I remember no more of that catacomb clearly. I remember only a wild, careening run, bouncing and staggering through that fiend-cursed catacomb, screaming in terror as the footsteps of my monstrous pursuer grew into my ears until I thought I was being buffeted by thunder; running, running forever, falling, crawling, staggering up, whimpering like a lost child and smelling a charnel smell of long sealed tombs freshly opened like a hot searing blast and then suddenly I fell, fell and sank into murky tepid water that blanketed my brain.

I RECOVERED in a waterfront doctor's office where my stomach was being pumped of the

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things I had swallowed. The doctor said I was otherwise fit and when he had finished wrenching my intestines, I staggered home.

I had been pulled out of the Mississippi River at the Barrack Street wharf at dawn, nearly drowned. Apparently I had fallen into some underground reach or pool of the mother of rivers, and had floated into the channel which sane men see. I tried to sleep when I got home, but I couldn't and still haven't. The thought of what lay beneath me was too awful.

The morning paper was at my door, and I fetched it when I realized sleep would not come, and may never come again. I opened the door and looked out at the sweaty dawn, at the last staggering remnants of the last night of carnival, at the streamers and confetti and torn masks and glass trinkets scattered over Chartres Street, the leftovers of revelry, and I seemed to feel better.

But then I glanced at the paper and choked with shock. There, on the front page, was a photograph of a high city official reviewing a Mardi Gras krewe parade, a parade held well after the time I had seen him gazing up at the gruesome altar somewhere below me now.

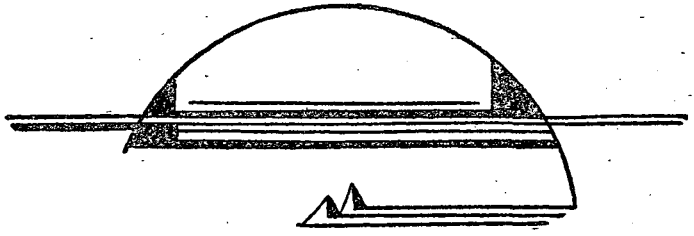
My loathing for the French Quarter became so great then that within a few hours I had packed my suitcase and had taken a room uptown in the Garden District, the staid, oak-lined old Garden District. It seemed to refresh me. But last night, the first night in that little room in the great old mansion, as I almost began to doze, it seemed that I felt the ground trembling below me with great shuddering footsteps. . . .

I snapped to attention and the sensation was gone. My nerves were wrecked. It was then that I began to toy with the idea of visiting you.

I made up my mind in a flash an hour ago when the landlady came and told me she was sorry, but that I should have to move.

I asked her why, and she told me that her house was suddenly and unaccountably sinking into the earth.

THE END



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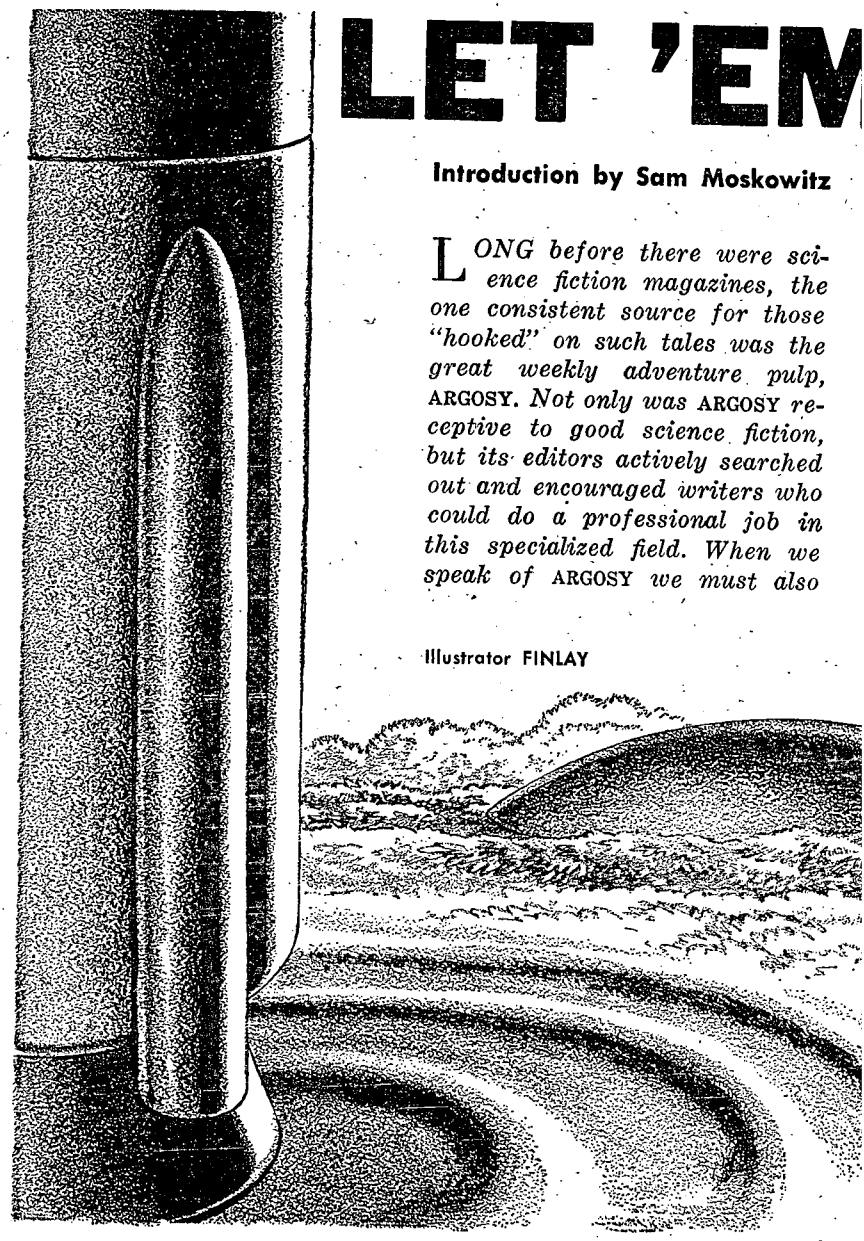
LET 'EM

Introduction by Sam Moskowitz

LONG before there were science fiction magazines, the one consistent source for those "hooked" on such tales was the great weekly adventure pulp, ARGOSY. *Not only was* ARGOSY *receptive to good science fiction, but its editors actively searched out and encouraged writers who could do a professional job in this specialized field. When we speak of* ARGOSY *we must also*



Illustrator FINLAY

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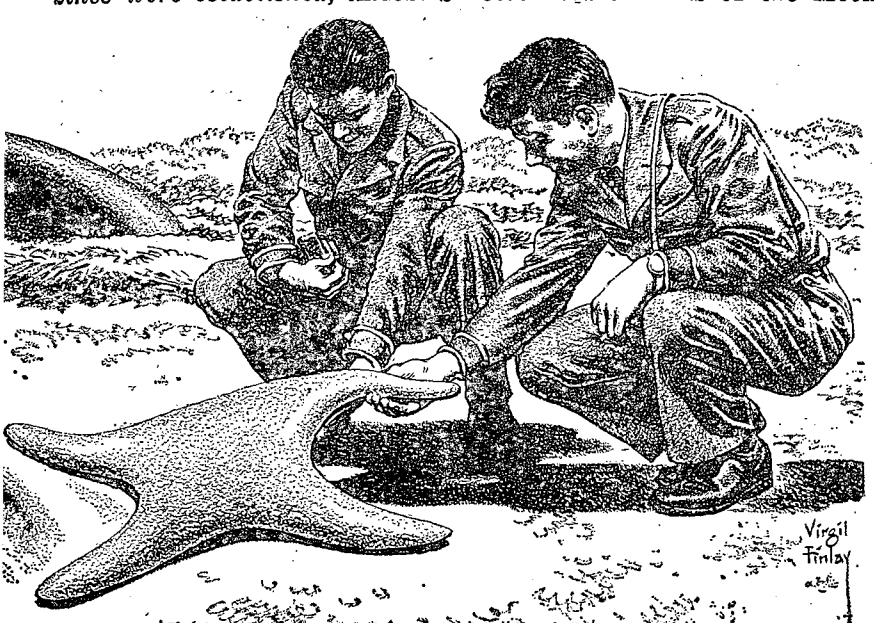
EAT SPACE

By WILLIAM GREY BEYER

include its memorable companion ALL-STORY MAGAZINE, *with which it combined in 1920.*

A few of the popular authors they introduced to science fiction and fantasy were Edgar Rice Burroughs, A. Merritt, Ray Cummings, Murray Leinster, Erle Stanley Gardner and many others.

After the science fiction magazines were established, ARGOSY'S *new additions were generally recruited from these sources and its own proteges became less frequent. An interesting exception was William Grey Beyer. Little information is known concerning him, the publisher of his only book* Minions of the Moon *(Gnome Press, 1950) is able to reveal only that he had been a Philadelphia policeman.* ARGOSY *serialized* Minions of the Moon



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in three installments beginning in its April 22, 1939 number where it scored an instantaneous hit. Beyer had a light, breezy style that carried the reader easily along. His characterization of a disembodied intelligence, "Omega" in that story proved a tantalizing memorable one.

Later, reader and editorial demand produced a series of sequels, all of short novel length: Minions of Mars, Minions of Mercury *and finally* Minions of the Shadow. *For a while it appeared that a new reader's favorite had come into being. However, when* ARGOSY *was sold by Munsey to Popular, Beyer no longer appeared and except for a single short story and a brief revival when his first novel,* Minion of the Moon *was published in book form and later reprinted in* TWO COMPLETE SCIENCE ADVENTURE NOVELS MAGAZINE IN *1952, he disappeared from the fantasy scene.*

Let 'Em Eat Space *was the one story he did for* ARGOSY *that was not in the "Minions" series. It was published in the Nov. 4, 1939 issue of that magazine and its reading provides highly entertaining and conclusive understanding of why the readers liked him.* Let 'Em Eat Space *clearly derives its essence from Stanley G. Weinbaum's* The Lotus Eaters. *The strange animals on another world who can philosophically accept the normally repugnant experience of being eaten alive by a predator remind one very much of "Oscar" the inverted bushel basket, featured by Weinbaum. The style has the same light touch but is not imitative in the sense of trying to duplicate Weinbaum's method of phrasing. Considering the short span of his writing career, Beyer was stylistically the most successful of those influenced by Weinbaum but limited by the lack of scientific substance, possessed by his model, an element that might have given his work longer life.*

MR. MONTGOMERY, first vice-president of Interplanetary Insurance, Incorporated, was gazing in a severe and somewhat disapproving manner over the upper rim of his horn-rimmed spectacles. Across the polished desk fidgeted Mr. Ham Eggles, small and dapper, and Mr. Slim Winters, tall, thin and unkempt.

Ham, with a small portion of his mind, was wondering what would happen if Mr. Montgomery ever should happen to look through those specs. By far the greater part of his gray matter, however, was engaged in pleasant contemplation of the charms of a certain bar-maid of his acquaintance.

Slim, on the other hand, was a

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man who invariably concentrated on the matter at hand. He was busy worrying why the boss had summoned them.

Mr. Montgomery cleared his throat. "I suppose," he said, "that you gentlemen are familiar with the phenomenon of metabolism."

Ham looked at Slim and Slim looked at Ham. "Why sure," they chorused; then abruptly fell into an embarrassed silence.

"Yes, of course," said Mr. Montgomery dryly. "I knew also, after I had consulted a dictionary. But I'll save you that trouble. Metabolism is the process of building up and breaking down of tissues and cells in living organisms. It constitutes the vital chemical processes of life itself."

His audience revealed by facial expression that it had heard of some such thing back in its school days.

"Now that you thoroughly understand the subject," continued the boss, "you will probably be interested to know that it has slowed up."

"What has?" queried Ham, absently.

"Metabolism, you rum-soaked Casanova!" supplied Slim.

"This fact came to us as a result of diligent investigation on the part of our research department," said Mr. Montgomery, ignoring the by-play.

"We have been deluged with industrial claims that have been pouring in from all over the solar system. This unexpected departure from normal began in the spring of 2074, over a year ago. We have traced the cause of most of the accidents to a lack of alertness and agility on the part of the victims. Workers are no longer able to keep up with their machines.

"All sorts of things have been happening. Men are getting their hands taken off in punch presses; airplanes are making poor landings; bus drivers are getting in accidents, trying to make their schedules. In short, wherever men are engaged in work with machines which are normally geared to keep pace with human ability, they are having trouble."

Mr. Montgomery leveled an accusing finger.

"It has also come to light that men engaged in sound research, in connection with the cinema and radio industries, have found that women who formerly sang soprano are now baritones, and men who were baritones are now making sounds far below the audible range of normal hearing. And yet the ear has failed to detect any change."

WITH these facts to work on, we soon discovered that the reason for the condition lies in the fact that metabolism has slowed up. Further investigation has proven that all life in the

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solar system has been similarly affected. To sum up the situation: life has been slowed down to a crawl. And we must do something about it!"

He emphasized his words with a resounding thump on the desk with a balled fist. Slim and Ham were looking slightly bewildered by this time, for metabolism, a purely biological business, was entirely out of their scope. Slim hesitantly advanced this information.

"I'm coming to that," said the boss. "As I mentioned, we must do something about this deplorable situation. For although the company has weathered the storm of claims, and keeping in mind that mankind is becoming accustomed to the slower rate of metabolism, we have no assurance that the thing may not occur again. We could scarcely hope to retain our solvency if that happened.

"And then, too," he added, as an afterthought of little consequence, "mankind might not survive another such drastic change.

"But to continue: our research workers have further discovered that concurrent with the deluge of accident claims, certain scientists reported a sharp decrease in the amount of cosmic rays which reach the solar system. The inference is obvious—that the rate of metabolism is directly dependent upon intensity of cosmic rays absorbed by the living being.

"And there," the boss concluded, "is where you gentlemen enter the picture. It is your job to determine the cause of the decreased density of these rays."

Ham remained in a state of bewilderment—at least that portion of his mind which was not lingering on the aforementioned barmaid. The problem of the cosmic rays seemed as remote from his field as had the matter of metabolism. For he and Slim were not engaged by the company as scientists or research workers, but rather as detectives, confining their activities to doubtful claims in various parts of the solar system.

But where Ham failed to see the connection, Slim apparently grasped the idea immediately.

"You mean . . . interstellar space?"

"Precisely. Cosmic rays originate far outside the solar system, and you'll have to follow them if you intend to learn anything. Our experts will give you all the necessary information.

"Your ship is equipped with the most modern of gravity drives, capable of many times the speed of light. The latest space-warp principle will be incorporated into the design of the drive. That will take only a few days. You are to use it, of course, only after you are well out of the system."

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II

SOMEWHAT less than a week later a silvery torpedo may have been seen flashing past the outermost planet of the solar system.

But if it was seen at all, it couldn't have been observed for any great length of time. For shortly after passing the orbit of the most distant rampart of old Sol, the ship surpassed the speed of light itself, immediately becoming invisible to any observer in the rear of its line of flight.

Ham was staring contentedly ahead into the void, through which they were rushing with such speed that the light of the stars ahead was of a decided bluish tinge, when a frown came to mar his usual serenity of countenance.

"I know it's none of my business," he complained to Slim, "but if it's not too much to ask, just where the heck are we headed for?"

The elongated one lifted his eyes momentarily from a sheaf of astronomical charts and grunted, "Eta Geminorum, Propus!"

"Never heard of it," remarked Ham, returning to his star-gazing.

"A Cepheid variable of the long-period variety," informed Slim. "Has a period of 231.4 days during which it varies in magnitude from 3.2 to 4.2."

Ham continued staring for several minutes before his placidly preoccupied mind digested this. Slim was always babbling miscellaneous bits of information, interesting to him at the moment; and Ham had developed the faculty of completely ignoring him, especially when he had something on his own mind.

But when the intelligence did finally sink in, he snapped to attention.

"That's quite a ways out, isn't it?" he asked. "Is that where the cosmic ray experts said we'd find the trouble?"

Slim slowly uncoiled himself, deserting the charts, and rose to creakily stretch his great length. He was about six feet six, and so thin that Ham always insisted that he had to stand still for at least five minues to cast a visible shadow.

"That's what they said, little one," affirmed Slim. "I should think you'd take more interest in these minor details. You've been acting as if this little jaunt were in the nature of a pleasure trip."

"It probably is. I don't see what we can do about it, anyway. We didn't even know we had slowed up until old specs-on-the-nose told us. And neither does anybody else. By the time we get back people will be completely adjusted to the slower rate of metabolism. Or the machines will

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be adjusted, which amounts to the same thing. I can't see where the matter is of any great importance."

"You can't, eh? Suppose the thing happens again? Suppose the rays decrease until metabolism is slowed down to about one-third. Humanity would be very likely to suffer a fatal attack of indigestion."

Patiently, Slim explained.

"In the normal operation of the human body, a series of complicated chemical processes are constantly in progress. And the whole works would be thrown out of kelter by such a drastic departure from the proper speed of anabolism and katabolism."

"You certainly know a lot of words," Ham commented, not greatly concerned by the dire prospect. "But what has all that to do with this variable star we're heading for?"

Slim chuckled. Ham's question took a lot more words to answer.

"LOOK," he said, "It's believed that the cause of the decreased cosmic ray intensity lies somewhere in the vicinity of that star. Science has long been aware that the rays are sent out by every one of the Cepheid variables. Just why, is not known. But the inference is that whatever force causes these peculiar stars to pulsate, also generates the rays in enormous quantities.

"It has been observed that the short-period Cepheids appear to emit the greater number of rays. Of these, Zeta Geminorum is about the most active. On the other hand, the long-period variables gives off very few of the rays. All but one, and that's the one we're going to investigate.

"Propus, unbelievably, has always furnished the solar system with as great an intensity of cosmic rays as all of the other variables put together. And now, practically overnight, Propus diminishes its output to a point comparable with other long-period variables of similar size."

"Unbelievable!" mocked Ham.

"Don't be so darned flippant," exclaimed Slim, somewhat exasperated. "The fate of humanity is at stake if the thing should go any further."

"Not according to what you told me," said Ham. "The solar system is receiving its present diminished supply from the other Cepheids, and is managing to get along just the same. The mysterious decrease from Propus isn't likely to be repeated over such a widely scattered area. My deduction is that the tremendous output from that star was an unstable phenomenon, and something happened to restore it to normal. Logical, what?"

Slim clasped and unclasped his hands several times, meanwhile looking very thoughtful. He then

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grunted eloquently and sat down to resume study of the star charts.

"While you're looking at those road maps," Ham suggested, "see if you can find if our shrinking violet has any planets, and if so, how big."

Slim grunted again, riffled the charts and picked out the desired one. "The best telescope ever developed couldn't see a planet small enough for us to stand up on, at that distance. The chart shows one planet, about the size of Jupiter, and notes that there are probably four more. Maybe one of them will be our size."

The chart-maker turned out to be a fairly accurate guesser. The travelers were able to spot four satellites of the pulsating luminary, including the one shown on the map. It was altogether possible that there was one or two more, either extremely distant from their sun, or of very low albedo.

But they weren't greatly interested in the possibility, for their attention was immediately attracted to the second world in the system.

Approximately nine thousand miles in diameter it gave off a bluish-green light, similar to that of the earth, when seen from a proximity of a few million miles. The resemblance decided them. They would land.

If intelligent life was to be found in the system, this seemed the most likely place to find it. Slim was on fire with the thought that he might be able to communicate with the denizens of this planet, and learn from them the reason for their sun's peculiar actions.

AS the ship approached, the planet's resemblance to earth became even more marked. There were mighty oceans, vast forests and even greater areas of arid desert. The proportion of water to land was somewhat less, indicating greater age; but it was still a fair substitute for Mother Earth.

"There's one thing missing," Slim noticed.

"Cities," supplied Ham. "I've been looking for them."

"Wait'll we get closer. Maybe they don't live in cities."

"Maybe they don't. And then again, maybe there aren't any 'they'."

But there were. As the ship neared the planet it became evident that some sort of a civilization was flourishing below them. Scattered widely over the surface of this world, were hundreds of large buildings of peculiar construction.

There seemed to be no system to their distribution, for they were situated in the most unusual spots. Invariably dome-shaped, and of a grayish-white color, the

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structures were just as likely to be seen in the middle of a desert, or perched precariously on the side of a mountain, as in a more conventional position.

"Look at that one!" Slim pointed. "Tilted on its edge, and half buried in the side of that hill!"

"Looks like the inhabitants of this sphere are among the dear departed," Ham guessed. "It's a cinch they didn't build those things in such dizzy places. More likely they've been there for thousands of years, and the topography of the land has altered."

"I guess so," admitted Slim, gloomily. "They weren't built for human use anyway. I haven't seen a window or door in any of them."

"Well, let's land, get into one of them, and take some pictures."

It was several minutes before they decided on one of the structures, situated in a desirable spot. The one selected lay almost in the center of a broad, grassy plain, and they picked it because a clear view was to be had for miles in all directions. If there happened to be any dangerous animal life on the planet they wouldn't be caught unaware.

The ship landed about a hundred yards from the curious structure.

Slim turned off the gravity controls, and they took a few cautious steps.

"Don't notice any difference," Ham remarked. "Should be heavier."

"Maybe this planet is composed of lighter materials," Slim hazarded, busy with the analysis of a sample of the outside air. "You can't always depend on size. Look at that little baby that balances Sirius. Smaller than the earth, and heavier than the sun."

"You look at it. How's the air?" piped Ham.

"Nineteen percent oxygen, and three percent carbon dioxide. The rest is helium, except for small quantities of some of the rarer gases found in our own atmosphere. Pressure, about seventeen pounds."

"Ought to be breathable," decided Ham. "Bring the torch."

HE released the latches on the inner airlock door, while Slim produced the torch from a locker. The outer door followed, and in a minute they had jumped to the ground and were breathing the air of the new planet.

They wasted no time looking around them, but set out immediately to cover the short distance to the hive-like building. Slim was carrying the torch, with which they intended to burn their way inside; Ham was lugging a camera and a few dozen flash bulbs. They were about half-way to the structure when involuntarily both stopped dead in their tracks.

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III

"I THOUGHT that was a rock!" exclaimed Ham, gazing in consternation at an object slightly to the right of their path. The object, about three feet in diameter and smoothly rounded, when they first sighted it, was now about five feet long and as thick through as Ham's thigh.

"Looks more like a worm to me," said Slim, judiciously, "Except that it's brown—although that could be sun-tan."

"Which end is which?" inquired Ham.

"Neither. A worm's the same on each end. You have to wait until it moves, and even then you might be fooled. It might be backing up."

But it became immediately apparent that this system, admittedly unreliable, was less than useless in the case at hand. For the worm moved, and in a quite unpredictable manner. Its opposite sides bulged and kept bulging until it resembled a four-pointed star-fish.

"It'll never get anywhere that way," was Ham's comment.

"Maybe it's not going anywhere. Maybe it wants to hear you make some more silly remarks. Come on."

"But suppose this is an intelligent creature?" suggested Ham "Maybe we should try to communicate with it."

"Phooey! That's an ameba-like animal on the order of those creatures that infest the marshes of Venus, except for the healthy color and the larger size. They live sluggishly by ingesting nourishment from the grasses and other vegetation with which their bodies come in contact. Reproduce by fission."

"You seem well acquainted around here," Ham murmured.

But inasmuch as the strange creature seemed satisfied to retain his star-fish shape, and made no further effort to be entertaining, Ham decided that Slim was probably right, and the two resumed their former course.

They had taken only a few steps, when they were again brought up short. They both distinctly heard the word, "Wait!" They looked at each other, each thinking for a brief instant that the other had spoken. Then the answer dawned on them.

"It was the worm!" Slim exclaimed.

"You mean the ameba-like creature," corrected Ham, sarcastically.

"Which is correct," informed the star-fish. "My composition is very similar to the picture your mind gives me of the ameba."

The two voyagers looked incredulously at the astounding creature. Their astonishment was due to the fact that they now realized the thing was causing the

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words to be formed in their minds, and making no audible sound while doing it.

Such an accomplishment had often been imagined, and indeed it was believed that certain men had abilities in that direction; but neither had ever encountered the phenomenon and the experience was eerie in the extreme.

"Did I hear you infer that you can read our minds?" Slim finally queried.

NOT your ordinary thoughts," explained the ameba. "They are not strong enough to transmit themselves. But I do receive impressions when you speak, for the effort expended makes the waves stronger. And of course I can make my own thoughts strong enough to impress them on your primitive minds."

Slim turned to Ham. "I think he's pulling our collective leg. What could be more primitive than an ameba?"

"But there's nothing primitive about telepathy," Ham reminded.

"And I didn't say that I was an ameba," corrected the creature. "I merely said that I am similar to one. As a matter of fact, my people represent the evolution of that uni-cellular form carried out to the *n*th degree."

"Then you, personally, are not unicellular?" deduced Ham.

"No more than you are."

The star-fish stretched forth one of its members for their examination. "You will notice that my skin is of a rubbery nature, and quite tangible and opaque. The unicellular creature is transparent, and the outer covering is so tenuous that it readily allows food and moisture to pass through.

"The ameba, as such, is strictly limited as far as size is concerned. Its cell walls would break down from its own weight if it grew too much. So obviously I am constructed of many cells."

"Sounds reasonable," Slim admitted. "But if your skin is so tough, how do you eat? Or don't you need nourishment?"

Again one of the pseudopodia was thrust out, this time bottom side up. There were dozens of small openings on the under side of the member, some of them gaping and closing rhythmically.

The men shuddered involuntarily, for the whole thing looked very much like one of the arms of an octopus. Then, abruptly, all of the openings closed and the rubbery texture of the skin became smooth and unbroken.

"I was only demonstrating," explained the evolved ameba, apologetically. "The mouths are not there when I don't need them to admit food. Merely a multi-celled adaptation of the uni-cellular form. Even my brain is but the highly evolved replica of the nucleus of a primitive ameba."

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"If it's not too much to ask," ventured Ham, "do you have, concealed somewhere about your person, a pair of eyes?"

"Nothing so complicated. Instead I see with every nerve on the surface of my body. It is by far the most simple and efficient visional apparatus, for I can see in all directions. All the nerve-ends are sensitive to light."

"Amazing," claimed Ham. "But how about . . ."

"Wait a minute," Slim broke in. "We're forgetting what we came here for. Maybe this gent knows the answer."

But before either man could put the question to the ameba, a feeling of acute alarm swept into their consciousness with such intensity that both cringed as if threatened with instant extinction. They knew that the sensation was caused by a similar feeling in their new acquaintance, but it was none the less real.

RUN! . . . Run!" shrilled the next mental message. And run they did. There was no time wasted in looking about for danger.

Too many times in the course of their inter-planetary wanderings they had been in spots where instant flight was the only means of survival; they did not hesitate now.

But before they had covered half the distance to the space ship, an unseen blow from behind knocked them flat. Scrambling wildly to their feet, they fairly flew the rest of the way.

As they were about to leap for the edge of the airlock, Ham let out a yelp as he was again knocked down, this time more forceably than before. But Slim made the jump, lithely pulled his lanky body up, and turned in time to lend the other a hand.

Slamming the outer door, after hurriedly noting that the ameba was nowhere to be seen, they stood panting and trembling. Finally Ham, having caught his breath, chuckled at the ludicrous expression of fright on Slim's face.

"Funny, eh?" Slim panted. "I suppose you know what it's all about. What knocked us down, and what became of our pal . . . Come on, let me in on it."

Ham sobered and looked out of the nearest port. An empty plain stretched in all directions. Empty, that is, except for the mysterious building and the camera, flash bulbs and torch, which they had dropped when ordered to run. There was no sign of their recent acquaintance, the high evolved ameba.

"I've sort of run out of ideas," he admitted, shakily.

It was a full hour later, and almost a full quart of Scotch whisky later, when Slim again voiced wonderment at the creature's

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strange absence from the landscape.

"I wonder what became of Jasper," said he.

Ham dwelt sadly on this mystery as he poured out the last of the Scotch. For several minutes the silence was broken only by the occasional liquid gurgle of a trickle of Haig and Haig passing an unsteady epiglottis.

Both men were mourning the disappearance, but for different reasons. Slim's mind was wholly filled with the lost opportunity for gaining some knowledge of the strange behavior of Propus; his friend had conceived a genuine—if slightly alcoholic—affection for the mission ameba.

"He seemed such a friendly sort of a critter," said Ham, half tearfully. "No harm in 'im a-tall."

"And so darned willing to oblige," supplemented Slim. "He was willing to tell all—if we had only been given time to ask him."

"And not only that," enlarged Ham, striding uncertainly toward one of the ports, "but he wasn't impolitely asking us a bunch of questions about our origin. And he must have been very curious about it, too. . . . Say!"

He broke off, attracted by something outside. "Come here, quick!"

Slim bounded to his feet, almost folded up, but managed to reach the bullet-like window. He arrived just in time to see a small rabbit, or something that looked like a rabbit, come to an untimely end. The animal had been chased, and overtaken, by a shadow.

At least it had seemed to be a shadow while it was in motion, but now as it stopped and engulfed the rabbit in its indefinable blackness, it looked more like a hole in the ground. It was impossible to focus the eyes on the thing.

SLIM blinked several times, thinking of the pernicious effects of alcohol on the optic nerve, but was still unable to determine anything about the blob of darkness other than the fact that it appeared to be about the size of the vanished creature he had called Jasper.

"I'll bet that's the jigger that bowled us over," he finally said, turning to Ham, who was futilely trying to coax a few more drops from the bottle.

"Wouldn't be surprised," sighed Ham, returning to the port for another look. "What do you think we should . . . Hey! It has went! What became of it?"

Slim again looked out, but saw nothing of the shadow and no sign of the unfortunate rabbit, if that's what it was.

He explained patiently that he had no part in the phenomenon and that the shadow had certainly been there when he looked away, and followed this intelli-

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gence with the suggestion that inasmuch as Propus was getting ready to set, it might be a good idea if they both sought relief from the harrowing memories of the day's happenings, by catching a little sleep.

Ham, with a solemn gravity reminiscent of the bottle, agreed wholeheartedly. Tomorrow, he averred was another day.

TOMORROW, indeed, was another day; although as events progressed, it turned out to be quite as harrowing as the one it followed.

It was a good twelve hours after the setting of Propus that the first ruddy rays of the morning entered a port and moved to the point where they shone directly on Ham's face. He opened slitted eyes, sat erect and groaned.

But there was no time for him to collect his sense and realize to the fullest how terrible he felt, for a diversion occurred immediately. The light which had awakened him was shut off abruptly; and, quite startled, he got up to investigate.

The port in question was a good ten feet above the ground, and the ship was still situated in the middle of a treeless plain. That he was startled is easy to understand.

For nothing—except a cloud, which would have made the light dim gradually—should have been there to cast that shadow. Uneasy thoughts of the rabbit-killing menace of the night before coursed through his head as he peered through the little window.

"Good moning," greeted a familiar voice.

"It's Jasper!" he muttered, incredulously. And then he saw the obstruction. It was, indeed, Jasper. And that personage was hovering, quite nonchalantly—as if such doings were a regular thing with him, which, of course, was altogether possible—a short distance above the window.

"I don't wish to disturb you," came the emanation. "But will you please let me come inside?"

Ham thought he detected a note of urgency in the message. He seemed to be experiencing, in a slighter degree, the same feeling of horror and fear that had preceded the attack of the day before. He made record time of opening the airlock, admitting the ameba, who floated eerily past him, and shutting it again.

"I was afraid you wouldn't awake in time," said Jasper, gently settling to the floor. "I was about to be attacked by one of the Mad Ones."

"Why didn't you wake us? Your thoughts seemed to penetrate the walls of the ship easily enough."

"Oh, I wouldn't have considered it! We Jaspers are very considerate of each other's privacy."

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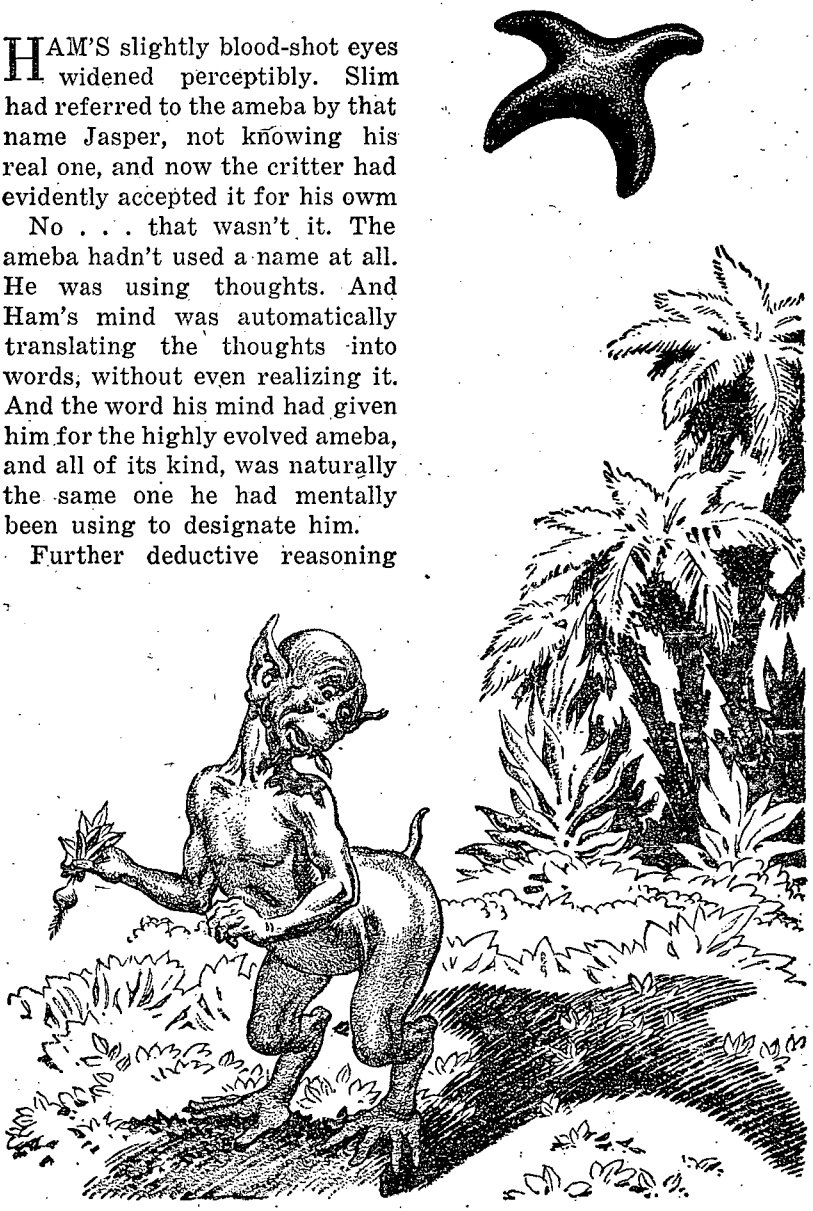
IV

HAM'S slightly blood-shot eyes widened perceptibly. Slim had referred to the ameba by that name Jasper, not knowing his real one, and now the critter had evidently accepted it for his owm

No . . . that wasn't it. The ameba hadn't used a name at all. He was using thoughts. And Ham's mind was automatically translating the thoughts into words, without even realizing it. And the word his mind had given him for the highly evolved ameba, and all of its kind, was naturally the same one he had mentally been using to designate him.

Further deductive reasoning



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along those lines was abruptly interrupted by a minor explosion from the direction of Slim's bed. That gentleman had begun to squirm and thrash about as the sound of the conversation penetrated his dim consciousness.

Suddenly he yelled in a fear-filled voice, "Get him offa me!" and sat up, looking a bit sheepish.

"Musta been something I et," he explained, looking with pleased surprise at Jasper. "What became of you last night?"

"I rose in the air, out of harm's way. My people utilize the principle of levitation as a normal function of our bodies."

"Amazing!"

"If you'll remember," suggested Ham, "this is your week to get the meals. Suppose you break out the tomato juice while I converse with our guest. By the way Jasper, is there anything my friend can prepare for you? I don't know whether our sort of food would agree with you."

"Nothing, thank you. I have eaten my usual meal of grasses and require no more."

"Well—in that case let's get back to where we left off. You were about to be attacked by one of the Mad Ones. And what might they be?"

"They are really Jaspers like myself," informed the guest. "Except that they are changed in a horrible and irreversible way. I'll tell you about it. A few hundred years ago, there was a very adventuresome Jasper who wanted to explore into the outer gaseous envelope of our luminary. He protected himself with very strong walls of force surrounding his body, and set out to do this very thing.

"For ordinary travel in space he had taken more than sufficient precautions, for the force-screen he set up about himself was several times the intensity of the ones we Jaspers have been using for millions of years.

"But never before had we undertaken to approach a sun closely, let alone actually enter one. And evidently there was something lacking in his screen, admitting an unknown vibration; for a peculiar mutation occured in both brain and body.

Jasper's thoughts appeared troubled for a moment, before his discourse continued.

THIS wasn't noticed for some time after his return. But when he divided—we follow the same lines of development as the uni-cellular creature in regards to division by fission—the effects became at once apparent. The two smaller beings became almost invisible, reflecting only the infra-red vibrations, and absorbing all the higher ones.

"They also became carnivorous. An unheard-of thing, for we Jaspers respect the right of all

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living creatures to exist without interference. And to make this change even more horrible, the Mad Ones took to devouring their own brothers, when they were unable to find other animal food.

"They are becoming quite a problem, for since the mutation occurred they have multiplied at a much faster rate than normal Jaspers, and now number almost one-tenth of our population. And all of our ingenuity has failed to find a means of returning the Mad Ones to normal."

Slim looked thoughtfully over the rim of his glass of tomato juice.

"You mentioned 'brothers,' " he observed. "I can easily see how beings who reproduce as you do, would all be brothers—or perhaps fathers or uncles. Is that why it has never occurred to you to exterminates these Mad Ones?"

Jasper didn't answer immediately. Although he possessed no features with which to express emotion, it was evident that Slim's words had shocked him, and probably started a train of thought in an unexplored direction.

"I can see that such a course would be natural to a race of beings who developed under a more competitive environment," he finally said. "But you must understand that such a thing would be abhorrent to my people. We have never known strife; not even mild competition. We have never been faced with the need for fighting with any of the myriad forms of life with which we have come in contact.

"Whenever a Jasper is attacked by a carniverous life-form, he merely rises and moves to a place where he is safe. So naturally the instinct to kill when menaced has never been developed in us."

"You wouldn't even fight when you know that eventually these Mad Ones will multiply to the point where the planet will be uninhabitable for you?"

"I'm afraid not. I know that I could not kill a Mad One, even if he were eating me. And therefore no other Jasper could, for we are all alike."

"That certainly is a sad state of affairs," Slim commiserated. "And it looks as if nothing we could think of would be of any help. We're too barbaric."

"Without any intention of offending, I'm afraid you are. And it is not likely that you could help solve the problem in the only way acceptable to us—that of correcting the mutation. For our civilization is millions of years older than yours, and we have spent that time profitably, not in war and strife. And so our minds are much better equipped to reason logically.

"Yet we have failed. Therefore, let us drop the subject and return

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to the point where we were interrupted yesterday."

The two men looked blankly at each other.

"You were going to tell me what you came here for," supplied Jasper. "You said, 'Maybe this gent knows the answer.'"

Slim grinned broadly and then proceeded to expound volubly on the solar system's metabolism trouble.

"We Jaspers were afraid of that," said the ameba.

"Then you know what caused the phenomenon. Tell us."

WE CAUSED it," admitted Jasper. "In fact we caused your race to come into existence, though of course we didn't plan it that way. I'll explain.

"Millions of years past, when the pulsations of our luminary were of much shorter duration, my race came into conscious existence. The property of levitation was ours even then, and to that gift is given credit for our rapid advancement in becoming sentient beings.

"For as we became larger and multicelled, we could avoid the terrible heat of our sun, during its intense periods, by flying through the air and continually keeping on the night side of the planet.

"This enabled the race to continue its mental development, while lesser creatures were forced to go into periods of hibernation when the sun was hot, and spend all of their time stuffing themselves with food when the sun was cool. Our periods of flying became periods of study and mental communion, during which great advancement took place."

"Pardon me a moment," Slim interrupted. "You mean that you flew for days at a time, keeping pace with the planet's rotation? Wouldn't that require a terrific amount of energy?"

"Quite the contrary. Our levitation mechanism operates on the same principle as the gravity drive of your ship. And it takes almost no energy to maintain a warp in the gravitational lines of force of a planet. The chief difference lies in the fact that the mechanism is a normal bodily function with us.

"But to continue. As time went on, and our population increased, it became apparent that new worlds would have to be found. At that time our numbers were doubling—by division, of course—every hundred years, and it was estimated that before another ten thousand years had passed, this planet would become uncomfortably crowded.

AND it was decided that we would choose, for the overflow, a world in some solar system where it would not be neces-

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sary continually to dodge the waxing periods of a pulsating sun.

"Such a world we thought we had found in your own planet. But we knew that your sun gave off but few of the emanations that made life possible to us. I refer to the cosmic rays. Accordingly we set up a tremendous projector at our south pole, which always faces toward your sytem, to compensate for the deficiency.

"It was necessary to make this projector powerful enough to manufacture many times the quantity of rays that any one Cepheid emits. This, of course, to compensate for the greater distance.

"We were still faced with the problem of taking care of our immediate increase, for it would be many times ten thousand years before your planet would be suitable for us.

"But, tragically, nature solved the problem for us. There came an extended period of volanic activity on this planet which resulted in the deaths of thousands and thousands of Jaspers. Our population fell off considerably, rather than increasing. But eventually normal circumstances returned and once again we multiplied.

"After a few million years it was decided that your planet should have by then developed the proper sort of plant life to support our race, and accordingly an expedition was sent out to investigate.

"But something had gone wrong. The earth was found to be inhabited by many forms of giant reptilian life, some of them carnivorous. The whole project was therefore a failure. The world was obviously unsuited to us. It was then necessary—"

WHOA there!" Slim again interrupted. "You said the expedition found gigantic reptiles. The age of saurians was way back in the Triasic and Jurassic periods, almost two hundred million years ago."

"Oh yes. The projector was built long before that—somewhere in the Carboniferous era!"

"Well why didn't you shut the thing off, once you saw that the earth was covered with the reptiles?" Ham wanted to know.

"But we couldn't do that!" exclaimed the ameba, sounding a bit horrified. "The reptiles required the rays, and to cease sending them would have been murder."

"And we invent such words as 'altruism,'" was Ham's mumbled comment.

"But the projector was no drain on our resources or our time," Jasper said deprecatingly. "It required no effort to maintain, for it operated by transforming useless emanations of our sun into the desired ones."

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"But what finally caused it to cease functioning?" inquired Slim.

"The Mad Ones turned it off. Why, I can't say, for in the vicinity of the machine there is an abundance of game, which they value. But they are quite irrational, and it is useless to conjecture on their motives. Several of my people have made attempts to start the mechanism, fearing that its failure might be causing suffering on your system; but each time they were driven away by the voracious Mad Ones."

Slim looked at Ham and screwed his face into a ludicrous expression of thoughtfulness. After several minutes of this, he evidently came to a momentous decision.

"It looks as if we had better take a trip to the south pole," he announced. "And the sooner, the quicker."

Ham, who had also been giving the matter some thought, saw a few objections.

"And if the place is crawling with Jasper's demented relatives, what do you propose to do? I've always been superstitious about being eaten. Don't think I'd like it—nohow!"

"Contrariwise!" supplemented Slim. "I don't intend to be eaten. I've got an idea."

"Most anything can happen now. All right, you start the ship, and our pal will show the way. Won't you, Jasper?"

"Of course," agreed the ameba. "But I don't see how . . ."

NATURALLY not. Beings with your finer instincts couldn't possibly think the things I'm thinking. But let's see if my idea isn't okay. You said that the Mad Ones reflect only infra-red from the surface of their bodies. And absorb all the visual light vibrations.

"My deduction is therefore, that such beings would not be able to stand much light. It would burn them up, inasmuch as light which is absorbed becomes heat. Am I right so far?"

"Yes, I believe you are. The Mad Ones are almost entirely nocturnal creatures. They never come out in the full light of day, and only occasionally in the late afternoon, when the rays of Propus are red and weak."

He hesitated. "But if you are contemplating the use of light rays to kill them, I think I would rather not have anything to do with such an undertaking."

"But I assure you, my dear Jasper, I am by nature as gentle as a lamb. Which reminds me—I was bitten by a lamb once. But he, of course, was a very vicious lamb.

"Here is the situation: We, as humans, wish to start up the cosmic ray apparatus. And that is

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just what we intend to do. Now, if in the act of so doing we are attacked by anybody at all, we must defend ourselves. Self-preservation is the first law of nature.

"To you, that takes the form of flight. But inasmuch as we are not endowed with the gift of levitation, we would have to fight to defend ourselves. And, knowing what we might have to fight, we would naturally prepare ourselves accordingly.

"Now that doesn't sound like premeditated murder, does it? We certainly are not asking them to attack us. In fact, we will go out of our way to avoid them."

THERE was a long minute of silence while Jasper weighed the finer moral aspects of the situation. He finally came to a decision, but it was not so much Slim's words as his own sense of responsibility which was the balancing factor.

On Slim's line of reasoning alone, he would still have refrained from having any hand in an act which might result in violence. But there was the annoying thought that the beings of the solar system were suffering because of a condition which was the direct responsibility of his race. And, in all justice, he must make sacrifices to help them.

Even if it meant going counter to his own moral convictions.

In a few minutes the ship was silently winging its way southward. Slim was at the controls, with Jasper hovering at his shoulder, while Ham was busily hooking small atomic generators to a pair of powerful searchlights. When he was finished, he tried them out, producing a light to rival the sun in brilliance, but still he seemed a bit dissatisfied.

He stood surveying his handiwork for a minute, decided the lights were too heavy for easy carrying, and set about to correct the fault by attaching leather straps.

Suddenly he stopped work, partially paralyzed by an idea. "Say!" he erupted. "What are we bothering with these lights for? Why not do our dirty work in the full light of day, about noon, when the Mad Ones are under cover?"

"Because there isn't any full light of day," Slim informed. "The place we are headed for is the south pole, and as you should have noticed, this planet rotates on an axis perpendicular to the plane of the ecliptic.

"Which means, of course, that the south pole region has a night and day of the same duration as at the equator, but receives very little light, even at high noon. Therefore, the Mad Ones are able to travel around without any discomfort all day long."

Ham went back to work, muttering to himself. There was one

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more thing he wanted to know, but he would be darned if he'd say anything and give Slim a chance to pop out the answer in his superior manner. But Jasper came to the rescue without being asked.

V

I SUPPOSE you have both been wondering why this planet does not possess the usual polar ice-caps that would be expected on a planet so far from its luminary," he telepathed.

"The reason has to do with our failure to find a suitable world to colonize. I told you that shortly after setting up the cosmic ray projector we were subjected to a long period of intense volcanic activity. This had two effects. Vast quantities of carbon dioxide were released, causing the average temperature of the planet to rise. And the added heat caused prolific vegetable growths, most of them unsuitable for our consumption."

Jasper waxed happily professorial.

"So abundant was the undesirable plant life that it choked out most of the sort of vegetable food we require. As a result, and this in spite of our decreased numbers, there came a shortage of food.

"To beings of our sort, however,this is not really serious, for when we eat less, we merely lessen our bodily activity. And we found it very easy to do this, for the volcanoes caused a thick cloud blanket to cover the planet, nullifying the pulsations of Propus, and removing the necessity for our periodic flying excursions.

"But perhaps the greatest result of the activity was to teach us that we needn't ever multiply to such numbers that the planet cannot hold us. For with the lessened food consumption and lessened activity we found that our division period was lengthened to more than a thousand years.

"And inasmuch as our mental keenness was not impaired by slowing down our bodily activity, it was decided to continue at the new rate, even after food became plentiful."

"How about the sun's pulsations, after the volcanic activity had ceased?" Ham inquired.

"We had learned our lesson," replied Jasper. "And thereafter we took steps to control our climate so that all portions of the planet are ideal for our own existence. It was simply a matter of the amount of suspended dust particles in the atmosphere ,and providing means of controlling the proper percentage of carbon dioxide.

"That is why we have no terrifically hot torrid zone, and also no polar ice-caps. The machinery for maintaining this ideal cli-

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mate is housed in those hemispherical structures you were so curious about, and is completely automatic and self-repairing."

THE ship terminated its swift flight in a land of broad plains covered by dense, but stunted, shrubbery. The light of Propus was dim and reddish, coming from such an oblique angle that it lost most of its brightness in the thick blanket of atmosphere through which it passed.

Slim set the ship down a short distance from a structure similar in general appearance to the one they had intended to cut into the day before. This one, Jasper assured them, contained the cosmic ray projector.

It differed from the other buildings in two respects. For one thing, it had a small opening in its lower rim—left there, Jasper told them, so that they could gain entrance to make adjustments in the apparatus.

He explained that while this planet would continue to face its south pole toward the solar system for many ages to come, there was a slow, continual shift taking place, which necessitated correcting the aim of the projector every few millions of years.

The other difference was that the upper portion of the dome was made of a darker colored substance—a better conductor of the rays, they were informed.

Once outside of the ship, Ham strapped one of the lights on Slim's chest, and showed him where to turn on the switch. Slim, in turn, strapped the other on Ham.

There were no blobs of shadow in sight, and they decided that the Mad Ones were temporarily elsewhere. But to warn them of any unexpeced attack, Jasper hovered in the air behind them as they headed for the opening in the structure. His brain, keen in telepathic reception, could pick up the jumbled thoughts of the Mad Ones, long before the two men could detect their presence by the sense of sight.

And besides acting as lookout, it was necessary for him to go along to start the machinery of the projector. He had decided against attempting to explain its intricacies, so that they could do it themselves.

But short as the distance to the building was, and clear of menace as the plain seemed to be, there was nevertheless plenty of time for distant Mad Ones to detect their presence and propel themselves to the spot. Like Jasper, they could attain terrific speeds.

The trio had barely gone twenty feet when Slim and Ham were again almost knocked senseless from the intensity of the horror emanations from Jasper's agitated mind.

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"Protect yourselves!" he shrilled, the terror thoughts warning and in their stead coming sensations of urgency and desperation.

The two men whirled and darted their eyes all over the landscape, trying to see the shadows that would reveal the Mad Ones. Possibly only a few seconds passed until they saw the inky blobs, hurtling toward them, but those seconds were stretched into minutes by their terrified minds.

But if their brains were temporarily paralyzed by the strength of Jasper's emotions, the condition didn't continue once they had sighted the enemy.

Twin beams of blinding light centered on the nearer of the shadows. When it struck them, clearly outlining their dead-black forms, they seemed to shrivel, hesitate for an instant, and madly plummet to the ground below.

"It works!" Ham exulted. "You're a genius, my boy—albeit a stupid sort of genius." He felt obliged to temper the praise a bit, considering how easily Slim's head was apt to enlarge.

But he had spoken too soon. It became apparent that there were quite a few of the shadows still on the way, and that some of these had evidently retained enough intelligence to see the danger in the searchlights.

For Ham saw out of the corner of his eye several black streaks fly off to the left of the main body. Divining their purpose, he frantically swerved and caught several of them in the beam from his lamp; but even as he saw them fall, he realized that in the moment that he must hold the beam on them, others were escaping off at a tangent. In a minute they would be coming from all directions.

"Head back for the ship, Slim," he urged. "They're flanking us!"

SLIM needed no coaxing. He had seen those oblique streaks of black and had come to the same conclusion. Grimly the two men strode along, hampered by the necessity of keeping the heavy searchlights continually swerving to catch those of the Mad Ones who were tearing in from the sides.

Sometimes one or the other of them would suddenly whirl and face the rear, warned by some mysterious sense that some of the enemy had managed to circle them.

And each time this occurred they would be rewarded by the sight of one or more of the inky blobs shriveling and dropping. The thought never occurred to them in the heat of the battle, that those warnings could hardly be part of their own sensory equipment. But as it became increasingly apparent that they never could fend off the menacing

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Mad Ones long enough to reach the safety of the ship, the source of the warnings made itself known.

Unexpectedly, each man felt a constricting band tighten around his waist and abruptly jerk him off his feet. Both thought the same thing—that one of the Mad Ones had finally reached them. They struggled frantically to free themselves, as the unseen being lifted them through the air.

"It is I," came the reassuring tones of Jasper. "Keep the lights working, or they may get us yet."

But in spite of the almost invisible rapidity of their dartings, the searchlights kept the menacing shadows at bay. Several times Jasper was forced to swing one of the men suddenly outward, to let him get a shot at one of the blobs attacking from above; but such was the coordination between ameba and man, made possible by Jasper's mental equipment, that every attempt by the Mad Ones was frustrated.

Once inside the ship, Slim slumped down at the controls.

"Where do we go from here?"

"We might learn how to build one of those projectors," Ham suggested. "Jasper could give us the dope."

"Where, stupid?"

"Why . . . How about Pluto? That's far enough out that a wide-angle projector would cover the rest of the system."

Slim snorted his disgust. "Pluto turns on its axis. How could you keep it aimed?"

Ham pondered this, discarded it; thought up some more ideas, and discarded them too. He was reduced to mentally kicking himself for having voiced a half-baked idea for Slim to scoff at, when suddenly he thought of another, and put it into words without thinking.

"Say!" he exploded. "Suppose we *had* managed to start that contraption. What was there to stop the Mad Ones from turning it off again?"

"Nothing except that I intended to seal the door over after we came out. The Mad Ones are too concerned with the business of finding raw meat to be bothered going to the trouble of breaking in. They weren't after us because we wanted to turn on the projector. All they wanted was a meal."

HAM paced the floor nervously. Slim continued to slump. Jasper said nothing and did nothing. Ham, glancing at him, decided he looked more like an oversized sofa pillow than an animate being. But then, you could not expect the guy to come out with an idea of how to murder his own relatives.

His glance then strayed idly to the medicine chest. His eyes lighted up avidly. With a quick

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stride, he reached the cabinet and jerked open the door.

Slim was too far gone in the doldrums even to raise his head at the sound of a familiar gurgle. But he roused himself at the satisfied *aah* which followed.

"Where did you get that?" he wanted to know.

"Medicinal purposes, old chap," explained Ham. "I'm sick. In fact I almost got et. That's enough to make anybody sick."

"I'm sick too," declared Slim, reaching for the bottle.

Fortunately it was only an eight-ounce bottle. If it had been a quart, it would have probably had the unusual effect of putting the pair of them asleep. Jasper, of course, didn't drink.

And if it had been a quart, and they had gone to sleep, then Ham wouldn't have become talkative, and Slim wouldn't have given birth to his prize idea. Such a catastrophe would very likely have changed the course of history on two solar systems.

But, as the chronicle has already recorded, it was an eight-ounce bottle. And Ham did become talkative.

At first he merely marveled that a machine that was potentially capable of operating for millions of years was stilled merely because they couldn't cross a few feet of ground to start it up.

From that his verbal wanderings progressed to wonderment at the methods used to supply power to run the machine all those millions of years. He had completely forgotten Jasper's explanation of that point.

Then he began to reminisce. In the course of which he covered much ground on the subject of power.

"Do you remember," he asked, "back before atomic power was developed?"

"Before my time," Slim grunted, somewhat annoyed.

He was in no mood to be tolerant toward Ham's lapses.

"I'm referring," Ham enlarged, "to the time just before atomic power was harnessed, and shortly after they learned to transmit tight beams of radio power. That was when the Sun Power Company made fortunes for a half-dozen men who had vision. They bought up a vast stretch of jungle land in South America, right on the equator, installed half a million selenium light-gatherers, on poles, and broadcast the power all over the world. Made a fortune selling the receivers.

"But the clever thing about the idea was the way they managed to put power production on a twenty-four hour basis. Broadcasting power from the sun after the sun had set!"

Slim, who had again sunk into a sort of apathy after guzzling

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his half of the bottle's contents, suddenly snapped to attention. Ham, not noticing, droned on.

"Yeah, that was pretty clever," he repeated. "Hiring two space ships—they were rockets then, too—and having them set up a orbit so that a light-reflecting screen, stretched between them, would send the sun's rays down to make daylight on the night side of the planet. They used to stay there a month at a time, conserving power by dissipating the screen when the sun was shining directly on the Amazon territory."

SLIM, by this time, was on his feet, striding toward a door which led into the ship's laboratory and work-shop. Jasper, suddenly come to life, floated after him. Ham, a bit bewildered but determined not to show it, followed in their footsteps.

Slim was already at work with a slide rule and a book of logarithms. After a few minutes he stopped, cupped chin in palm, and frowned. Ham was no less bewildered; but Jasper seemed quite aware of what was in Slim's mind.

"Power?" he inquired.

"Yes," answered Slim. "It would take more than this ship could produce. I would want a screen a lot bigger than the one those Sun Power lads used."

"Why?" asked Ham, suddenly realizing what they were talking about. "You only need a screen *big enough to bathe this particular region*, say a mile on all sides, with the full rays of Propus. And while you are up there maintaining the screen, I'll be down here turning on the projector and fusing the doorway shut. Simple, eh?"

"Goofy would be a better word," Slim asserted. "Where would you be while I am going up to erect the screen?"

Ham's face fell. "Et, I suppose," he said, lamely.

But Jasper, who had been indulging in quite a bit of thought along lines foreign to him before meeting these two representatives of a more primitive civilization, decided to take a hand in the discussion.

"Why did you wish to make a screen larger than the one suggested by your friend?" he inquired.

Slim looked steadily at the ameba.

"Jasper, old son, I think you know the answer to that. It was my hope that I could erect a screen, a curved screen, so huge in area that it would bathe the entire night side of this planet with intense sunlight. The thing is possible, too, with enough power. I wanted to exterminate every damned one of those Mad Ones."

"Why, may I ask?" the ameba calmly insisted.

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"You may," returned Slim. "Though I think you know the answer to that also. It was because I think you Jaspers are too danged fine a race of beings to be killed off. And that's just what will happen eventually, if the Mad Ones are allowed to continue in existence.

"While your people are living sedate lives, curtailing your rate of division so that the planet will not become over-populated, these creatures are madly thinking of nothing but their carnivorous appetites. And dividing at a terrific pace!

"You have deliberately understated the plight of your people, but I managed to see through your pretense that a reckoning was far in the future. It is imminent!

"Your doom is on top of you. How else could you unconsciously emit such a strong feeling of horror, at the presence of the Mad Ones? At first I thought it was a revulsion at the thought of cannibalism, but the last time it was much too strong to be merely that.

"And yet, in spite of that horror, you forced yourself to stay with us and help us out when the pinch came, even to swinging us around to get a shot at the enemy. Say, old boy, did you realize you were fighting? Well, after the way you acted, even if you had the instincts of a wild boar, I would want to do something for you. That's why I wanted to set up the big screen."

VI

JASPER evidently required some time to digest all this, for he ventured no comment. Ham, usually voluble, was shocked into temporary silence by the sudden realization that ever since Jasper had explained the nature of the Mad Ones earlier in the day, he had been unconsciously puzzled by hazy, nebulous thoughts about the ultimate fate of the amebas.

Even then his mind had been toying with the memory of the soul-chilling emanations the ameba had loosed on the night previous. But it had taken Slim's keen insight to make those thoughts concrete.

"Say, Jasper," Ham finally exploded. "You were saying something about your people never being required to fight any other forms of life in the past. You just rose in the air and fled.

"But just the same your flight was an expression of a universal instinct called self-preservation. And maybe when flight won't do you any good, you'll forget your principles and do what any other form of life does when it's cornered.

"My personal opinion is that you only think you could stand

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being eaten by a Mad One without trying to fight back. I figure that as individuals you Jaspers will fight when the time comes.

"The only trouble is that when the time comes that you can no longer run it will be because the Mad Ones have multiplied to the extent that they will begin to pick you off, one at a time, by ganging on you.

"What I'm getting at is that if I'm right, and your people will be forced by the instinct of self-preservation to fight when you are ultimately cornered, why can't you push the calendar ahead a little bit and do your fighting now, collectively while there is still time to save yourselves? You'll do it in the end, anyway, in spite of your finger instincts—but it'll be too late then."

THE two men looked at Jasper expectantly but once again he declined to answer.

For a brief moment they fancied there was some mysterious aura surrounding the ameba. There was an electric tensity in the air that made the silence seem tangible. For a short space they imagined the air shimmered and waved about the figure.

But the impression lasted only an instant, and Jasper became the same inscrutable being he always was. His smooth body was devoid of a revealing feature to indicate the workings of his mind. The incongruous thought passed fleetingly through Ham's mind that the ameba had the ideal equipment for playing poker. He had something better than a poker face. He had no face at all.

"It'll be too late then," repeated Jasper, absently. "We must find out!"

This made no particular sense to either of the men, nor did Jasper's following actions. He rose slowly from the floor, as if reluctant to continue, and floated toward the airlock. He hesitated over the spot where the men had dropped the powerful searchlights when they had dashed into the ship.

Then abruptly four pseudopodia thrust forth and grasped the two lamps, while a fifth reached out to open the door.

"Remain inside, please," he said, and swung the door inward just far enough to let himself through. It slammed shut before any of the Mad Ones even noticed it had been opened.

AS ONE man, Ham and Slim rushed to the nearest porthole. At first there was nothing to be seen. Jasper was not yet in their range of vision, and the reddish-gray landscape was broken only by an occasional hazy blot, marking the spot where one of the Mad Ones had fallen in the recent skirmish.

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Floating in the air were still a few who had not been struck by the light beams; but evidently the majority had moved on in quest of easier prey.

Presently Jasper came in sight as he moved slowly away from the ship; and simultaneously with his appearance two of the hovering Mad Ones plummeted toward him. Twin beams of blinding light met them half-way and down they dropped, seared inwardly by the converted heat from the rays.

JASPER evidently didn't invite further attack, for he retreated toward the ship.

Ham dashed to the door to let him in, then stepped back as Jasper floated slowly past him and deposited the lamps on the floor. Neither he nor Slim spoke when Jasper silently descended to rest beside the searchlights. Both knew that they had witnessed a momentous event.

For Jasper had, without even the driving urge of self-preservation, actually wreaked violence on a living creature. The experience must have shaken him to the core.

"Gentlemen." Jasper finally broke the silence. "My people have come to a decision. I have purposely refrained from telling you this, but ever since your ship entered our atmosphere you have been under observation. And ever since you began to inspect my body, your thoughts have gone forth to all of my race.

"I lied when I said that only when you spoke could I hear your thought vibrations. You would have realized that if you had remembered how long my people have been communicating by this means. The deception was advisable, for if you had known your mind was being probed, you would have been uneasy and suspicious.

"At first we were merely interested in you as two intrepid travelers, exploring a new world. We are great space-people ourselves, and took a kindly interest in you. But before long your thoughts began to stir up something in our placid egos.

"You thought primitive thoughts. Struggle and competition seemed to be the very essence of your existence. Your determination to find a way to restore the decreased rate of metabolism in your people interested us.

"To us, who have lived for millions of years in blissful tranquility, our needs foreseen and provided for without effort, so slothful that we could face our own destruction with equanimity, you—to use your own idiom—started something.

"Possibly it was an eon-long submerged racial vitality coming to the surface; some vital urge

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dating back before the conscious life of the race; something from the days when our uni-celled ancestors struggled in the primal slime of this planet—but your vigorous thoughts of self-perpetuation have stirred a similar urge in us.

"We have come to a decision. We shall throw off this slothful inertia which has gripped us for so long, and destroy the Mad Ones before they destroy us!"

SLIM jumped to his feet with a whoop and grabbed the extended hand of a gleeful Ham. Then they turned to Jasper with the full intention of slapping him on the shoulder, but this being obviously impractical, they just stood and grinned.

"But before this decision was made," the ameba continued, "it was necessary to determine whether or not a Jasper was capable of killing. Your argument that we would do it anyway, after it was too late, had to be tested. It was, therefore, suggested that I try it.

"As I once told you, we are alike in our reactions: if it were possible for me to force myself to do violence, then it would be equally possible for us all to do the necessary thing. And as you saw, I killed.

"You have shown us the way. We shall erect the screen—our mastery of vibration will make it simple—and maintain it until the last of the Mad Ones is dead. We can do this without regret, brothers though they may be, for we know that their state of mentality has fallen below that of the beast.

"Those of the present generation are conscious of but one thing, their appetites. They have no other mental pursuits, so we are fortifying ourselves with the thought that to kill them is no more a crime against our principles than killing the plant life which we use for food.

"We wish to assure you that this is to be accomplished immediately; and as soon as it is done, the cosmic ray projector will be restored to operation.

"Now I must request that you start your homeward journey at once. The thing we are about to do is to us a shameful act, for all its necessity, and we would rather it not be witnessed."

THE two earth dwellers, however, saw nothing shameful or degrading about an act of self-preservation; and accordingly, like Lot's wife, looked back. In fact, they did more than look back. They stopped the ship well out of sight of any of the intellectual beings of Propus' second planet, and trained a telescope on it.

Their point of view, it became apparent, was perfect. They had

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taken off from a point directly at the south pole of a world of the Jaspers, and were afforded a vision of the complete southern hemisphere. The day side of the planet was a brilliant crescent, vivid in detail, while the night side was a shadowy world.

The Jaspers were as good as their word. After a few minutes of watching it became evident that the work was already begun.

Slim, working frantically at the adjustment knobs on the telescope, brought into focus a vast cloud, its edges wavering and constantly changing, rising from a point on the lighted side of the planet.

Gradually the telescope brought the image closer and defined it more clearly.

Ham gasped as it became apparent that the cloud was composed of millions of Jaspers, rocketing through space at a terrific speed. Neither man had expected anything like this. They had expected to wait several days before anything happened, while the Jaspers constructed machinery to accomplish their purpose.

But obviously these beings were too advanced to require any such crude methods. They would make the necessary light-reflecting screen by direct manipulation of the energies thrown off by their sun, Propus. Each individual would do his part in constructing the vast reflector.

THE cloud approached a point several millions of miles above the dark side of the planet; and as it did the Jaspers which composed it began to diverge, taking paths away from the center of the cloud.

The two men scarcely breathed as they watched the magnificence of the spectacle. Each Jasper was taking his position as if with rehearsed precision. The whole formed a pattern millions of miles across. If lines could have been drawn through the tiny points in the pattern the result would have resembled a circular spider's web of almost unimaginable proportions.

Abruptly the two men slitted their eyes as the vast design flashed into blinding light. Each Jasper, utilizing the accumulated knowledge of a civilization old beyond human conception, was throwing off his portion of that huge mirror.

THE darkness below was suddenly turned into blazing day. The reflector was steady, motionless; and the two men knew that it would be maintained that way until every 'Mad One had given up the ghost.

Swiftly Slim pointed the telescope toward the ground below. But as quickly as he manipulated its controls, even quicker had been the action of the light.

Scattered from pole to equator

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were evidences that the menace of the Mad Ones was no more. Several times the telescope caught images of animals of varying sizes, dead and partially devoured; and each time they saw the shriveled remains of Mad Ones stricken in the middle of their carnivorous repasts.

At length the two men turned from the telescope and started the ship on its swift journey homeward.

Ham, a few minutes later, was struck with a familiar urge and began to rummage through the supply lockers. He wasn't exactly disappointed when he didn't find any Scotch.

"Some sight, wasn't it?" he remarked.

"Sure was," admitted Slim, bending over a sheaf of charts. "We ought to get a bonus for starting the ball a-rolling."

No answer. Silence, in fact—which was a thoroughly unnatural reaction to the mention of increased emolument. Somewhat alarmed, Slim looked up from the charts. And his alarm was not mitigated by what he saw.

Ham had found a bottle—a pint one, with the amber approximation of one slug of Scotch at the bottom. Yet he had apparently forgotten it; was, in fact, standing rigid, holding the bottle without seeing it. On his face was an expression of deep bereavement.

"For Propus' sake!" Slim exploded. "What's happened now? Who's died? Gimme that—"

Ham shook his head mournfully. "I was just thinking of Jasper. Nicest little gent you'd care to meet on any planet. I guess I'm going to kind of miss him."

"Oh that." Slim started a laugh. "Why he's just—" He paused, nodded. "Yeah," he finished lamely. "Yeah . . . me too."

And then it came, like a faint music seeping into their minds. Like a memory, distinct but impalpable. "Are my rays strong enough, earth-gentlemen We are grateful to you, and I personally shall miss you very much."

The two earth-gentlemen stared at each other, nodded slowly in unison. It was the McCoy.

"And now that things are already back to normal on your planet, I have begun to think how pleasant it would be to visit you there. Perhaps, at some future time, it would not be impossible. Meanwhile . . ."

Ham raised the bottle to his lips, drank exactly half a slug. Bowed profoundly.

And passed the other half-slug over to Slim.

Mother Earth sang happily in her course.

THE END

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By
ROGER
ZELAZNY

FINAL DINING

Illustrator SUMMERS

How does the music feel when it is scored?

The poem, as it is being written? The painting . . .

These thoughts were in my mind, but they were his.

I FELT the cat's tongue lick of his brush, lining my cheeks, darkening my beard.

He touched my eyes and they were opened. First the left, then the right. Instantly.

There was no blur of sudden awakening. I stared back into his own dark eyes, intent upon my face. He held the brush delicately as a feather, his thumbnail a spectrum of pigment.

He stood there, admiring me.

"Yes!" he breathed at last. "They *are* right! Lines of guilt, shame, terror—arrowing those target eyes!

"But they face into the light, nevertheless," he continued, "—unflinching!—with all the insolence and pain of Lucifer. They will not drop as he dips the bread . . .

"Beard needs more red," he added.

"Not much more," I said.

He squinted.

"Not much more, though."

He blew gently upon my face, then covered me.

Portrait sitting in fifteen minutes, he thought. *Have to stop.*

He was moving around. I felt him light a cigarette.

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Mignon is coming at ten.

"Mignon is coming," I said

Yes. I will show you to her. She likes to look at paintings, and I've never done anything this good before. She doesn't think I can. I will show her. Of course, she doesn't know art. . .

"Yes."

I HEARD a knock on the door. He let her in. I felt his excitement.

"You're always on time," he said.

She laughed, with the chime of an expensive clock.

"Always," she said, "until it's finished and I can see it. I'm eager."

She is wearing her portrait smile already, he mused, hanging her coat on the rack. *She is sitting in the dark chair now. Dark as her hair. Green tweeds, and a silver pin. Why not diamonds? She's got them.*

"Why not diamonds?" I asked.

"Why not diamonds?"

"Huh? —Oh, my pin?" She touched it, glancing down at a youthful breast. "You haven't painted that low yet, have you? I'm posing for a mantlepiece, not a cover story on family fortunes. So, I decided I'd rather have something simple."

She's smiling again. Is she mocking me?

"What's that one you have covered?"

She walked to the canvas.

"Oh," he said. Delighted. Anticipating. "It's nothing, really."

"Let me see it."

"All right."

The cloth rustled and I looked up at her.

"Goodness!" she said. "Peter Halsey's 'Last Supper'! —My, but it's fine."

She moved farther back, intent.

"He looks as if he's about to step out of the frame and betray Him all over again."

"I am," I said, modestly.

"He probably is," Peter observed. "He's rather special."

"Yes," she decided. "I've never seen those exact colors before. The depth, the texture—he's very unusual."

"He ought to be," he replied. "He came from the stars."

"The stars?" she puzzled. "What do you mean?"

"His pigment was ground from a meteorite I found this summer. Its redness grabbed my attention right away, and it was small enough to throw in the trunk."

She studied my brushwork.

"For something this good, you've painted it awfully fast."

"No, it's been around for some time," he said. "I was waiting for the right notion of how to do him. That red stone gave me the clue, the same week you began your sittings. Once I got started

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he practically painted himself."

"He looks as if he enjoys it all," she laughed.

"I don't mind a bit . . ."

"I doubt that he minds."

". . . for I am that organic changeling, left for a rock fancied as a footstool by the gods."

"Who knows his origin?"

He covered me, with a matador's flourish.

"Shall we begin?"

"Yes."

She returned to the chair.

AFTER a while, he tried to read her posing eyes.

"Take her. She's willing."

He put down the brush, stared at her, at his work, at her.

He picked up the brush again.

"Go ahead. What's to lose? And think of the gain. That silver could be diamonds on her breast. Think of her breast, think of the diamonds."

He put the brush down.

"What's the matter?"

"I'm tired, all of a sudden. A cigarette and I'll be ready to go again."

She rose, stretching her arms overhead.

"Want me to heat that coffee?"

He looked up, over at his cheap hot plate.

"No, that's all right. Cigarette?"

"Thanks."

His hand shook.

She'll think it's fatigue.

"Your hand is shaking."

"Tired, I guess."

She sat on his studio bed. He seated himself beside her, slowly, half-reclining.

"Hot in here."

"Yes."

He took her hand.

"You're shaking, too."

"Nerves. D.T.'s. Who knows?"

He raised it to his lips.

"I love you."

A frightened look widened her eyes, slackened her mouth.

". . . and your teeth are lovely."

He began to embrace her.

"Oh, please. . . !"

He kissed her, firmly.

"Don't. If you don't mean it . . ."

"I do," he said. "I do."

"You're wonderful," she sighed, "and your art. I always felt . . . But—"

He kissed her again, then drew her down beside him.

"Mignon."

"—"

PETER HALSEY looked out from his balcony, over the landscaped garden with its Augustan walks, the picturesqueness, the eighteenth-century prettiness, and down to the guard rails, the cliffs, and the long, steep slant into the Gulf.

"It is good," he said, and turned back toward his suite.

"Good," I repeated.

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I hung upon the side wall. He stopped before me.

"What are you smirking at, you old bastard?"

"Nothing."

Blanche entered from the bedroom, right, patting her wide halo of sunset-pink.

"Did you say something, honey?"

"Yes. But I wasn't talking to you."

She looked up at me, pointing with her thumb.

"Him?"

"That's right. He's the only good thing I've ever done, and we get along well."

She shuddered.

"He looks something like you, at that—only meaner."

He turned.

"Do you really think so?"

"Uh-huh. Especially the eyes."

"Get out of here," he said.

"What's wrong?"

"Nothing," he controlled himself. "But my wife will be back soon."

"All right, daddy. When will I see you again?"

"I'll call you."

"Okay."

A swish of black skirts and she was gone.

Peter did not see her to the door. Not her sort. He studied me a little longer, then crossed the room to the mirror and stared into it.

"Hm," he announced. "There *is* a little resemblance—subconscious pun or something."

"Sure," I said.

He strolled back toward the balcony, hands in the pockets of his silk dressing gown.

Once more, he looked at the ocean.

"Mater Oceana," he invoked, "I am happy and unhappy. Take . . . Take away my unhappiness."

"What is that?"

He did not answer me, but I knew.

Outside, I heard Mignon coming. The door swung open. I knew.

He stepped back into the room, looking at her.

"My, you're fresh. Why do you bother with beauty parlors?"

"To stay this way for you, dear. I'd hate to have you lose interest after two months."

"Small chance of that."

He embraced her.

I hate you, you rich bitch! You think you can run my life now, because you're footing the bills. You didn't make the loot either. It was your old man.—Go ahead, ask me if I worked today.

She pulled away, reluctantly.

"Do any painting this afternoon, dear?"

No, I was in the bedroom with a blonde.

"No, I had a headache."

"Oh, I'm sorry. Is it better now?"

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"No, I still have it." *You!*

"What about this evening?"

"What about it?"

"What was that French restaurant we passed yesterday?"

"Le Bois."

"I thought you might like to try it. We've eaten in all the others."

"No, not tonight."

"Where, then?"

"How about right here?"

She looked troubled.

"I'll have to call downstairs now, then."

I'll bet you can't even cook. I never have had a chance to find out!

"That'd be fine."

"You're *sure* you don't want to go out?"

"Yes, I'm sure."

Her face brightened.

"They'll set up a table in the garden, and send the food out on carts—for special guests."

"Why go to all that bother?"

"Mother said she and Dad had it that way when they honeymooned here. I've been meaning to suggest it."

"Why not?" he shrugged.

MIGNON looked at her watch. She raised her hand, hesitated, then tapped on the bedroom door.

"Aren't you dressed yet?"

"Just about."

Why don't you die and leave me in peace? Maybe then I could paint again. You have no real appreciation of my art—of any art! Or anything else. —Phoney aesthete! What have you ever worked for? Die! So I can collect . . . and stop bothering me!

"Why not tonight?" I asked.

"I wonder . . . ?" he mused.

"You are a happy couple—honeymooners. There would be no suspicion. Keep her there until late. Pipe her champagne by the gallon. Dance with her. When the waiters have left, when the lights are dim, when there are just you two, music, the champagne, and darkness—when she begins to laugh too much, when she stumbles as she dances," I concluded, "then there is the rail."

There was another tap on the door.

"Ready?"

Peter Halsey adjusted his tie.

"Coming, dear."

* * *

God! How much of that can she drink? I'll be under the table first!

"More champagne, darling?"

"Just a little."

He filled it to the brim.

"Bottle is getting low. Might as well kill it."

"You haven't been drinking much," she accused.

"I wasn't raised on it."

The candles were all. The trellises and islands of color now wore impenetrable cloaks. It was

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deep, inky, outside the wavering halo. The Strauss waltzes whirled and circled from the hidden speaker—but dignified, dim, *sotto voce*, and excluded from the table. The aromas of invisible blossoms were dying, unmingling themselves, in the refrigerator of night.

He looked at her.

"Aren't you cold?"

"No! Let's stay here all night. This is wonderful!"

He squinted at his watch. It *was* getting late.

A drink, to brace the nerves.

He quaffed the sour fire. Like snowflakes falling upward into a yellow sky, its icy jewels jetted through his head.

"Now is the time."

He leaned forward and blew out the candles.

"Why did you do that?"

"To be alone with you, in the dark."

She giggled.

He found her and embraced her.

"Kiss her—that's it."

He drew her to her feet, had a hard time unclasping her arms. But he led her, arm about the waist, to the white rail.

"How lovely the ocean, when there is no moon," she said, thickly. "Didn't Van Gogh once paint the Seine at ni—"

He struck her behind the knees with his left forearm. She toppled backward, and he tried to catch her. Her head struck a flagstone. He cursed.

"No difference. She'll be bruised anyhow, when they find her."

She moaned, softly, as he raised her warm stillness.

He leaned forward, shoving hard, and pushed her over the rail.

He heard her hit stone, once, but the *Blue Danube* covered all other sounds of descent.

"Good night, Mignon."

"Good night, Mignon."

IT was terrible," he told the detective. "I know I'm drunk and can't talk straight—that's why I couldn't save her. We were having such a good time, dancing and all. She wanted to look at the ocean, then I went back to the table for another drink. I heard her cry out, and, and—"

He covered his face with his hands, forcing a sobbing sound.

"—she was gone!"

He shook all over.

"—and we were having such a good time!"

"Take it easy, Mister Halsey." The man put a hand on his shoulder. "The desk clerk says he has some pills. Take them and go to bed. Honestly, that's the best thing you can do now. Your statement wouldn't be worth much, even though I can see what happened. I'll make my report in the morning.

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"The Coast Guard has a cutter out there now," he continued. "You'll have to go to the morgue tomorrow. But just get some sleep now."

"We were having such a good time," Peter Halsey repeated, as he staggered to the elevator.

Inside, he lighted a cigarette.

* * *

He unlocked the door and switched on the light.

The suite was transformed.

It was divided into alcoves by the hastily-constructed partitions. Of the original furnishings, only a few chairs and a small table remained.

A placard stood on the table.

Beside the placard was a leather notebook. He opened it, dropping his cigarette to the floor. He read . . .

He read the names of the critics, the gallery scouts, the museum reviewers, the buyers, the makers of opinion.

It was the invitation list.

A wisp of smoke curled up from the carpet. Unconsciously, he moved his foot to crush it. He was reading the placard.

Peter Halsey Exhibition, it said, *Arranged by Mrs. Peter Halsey, on the Anniversary of the Two Most Happy Months in Her Life. 1 AM to 2 PM. Friday, Saturday, Sunday.*

HE walked from niche to niche, repainting with his eyes all the works his hands had ever executed.

His watercolors. His stab at cubism. His portraits.

She had hunted them all down, bought or borrowed all of them.

Portrait of Mignon.

He looked at her smile, and her hair, dark as the chair; at her green tweeds; at the silver pin that could have been diamonds.

"—" she said.

Nothing.

She was dead.

And across the way, staring into her smile, with my beard of blood and bread in hand, amidst the dove-bright faces of the holy ones, with my halo also hammered from silver, I smiled back.

"Congratulations. The check will be in the mail promptly."

Where's my palette knife?

"Come now! No Dorian Gray business, eh?"

Where's something that will cut?

"Why this? You painted me as I am. You could as easily have used the pigment for someone else. —Him, for example, or him. —But I was your inspiration. I! We drew life from one another, from your despair. Are we not a masterpiece?"

"No!" he cried, covering his face once more. "No!"

"Take those pills and go to bed."

"No!"

"Yes."

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"She wanted me to be great. She tried to buy it for me. But she *did* want me to be great . . ."

"Of course. She loved you."

"I didn't know. I killed her . . ."

"Don't all men? —Wilde again, you know."

"Shut up! Stop looking at me!"

"I can't. I am you."

"I will destroy you."

"That would take some doing."

"*You* have destroyed me!"

"Ha! Who did the pushing?"

"Go away! Please!"

"And miss my exhibition?"

"Please."

"Good night, Peter Halsey."

And I watched him, shadow amidst shadows. He did not stagger. He moved like a machine, like a sleepwalker. Sure. Precise. Certain.

* * *

TEN hours have passed, and the sun is up. Soon now I will hear their footsteps in the hall. The cognoscenti, the great ones: the Berensons, the Duveens . . .

They will pause outside the door. They will knock, gently.

And after awhile they will try the door.

It will open, and they will come in.

In fact, they are coming now.

They will behold the eyes, tearless windows of a sin-drenched soul . . .

They have paused outside.

They will see the lines of guilt, shame, terror, and remorse—arrowing those target eyes . . .

A knock.

—But they face into the light, nevertheless—unflinching! They will not drop!

The doorknob is turning.

"Come in, my lords, come in! Great art awaits you! —See yourselves a writhen soul—the halo hammered from insurance claims, from pride—see the betrayer betrayed!

"Come! See my masterpiece, my masters, where it hangs against the wall."

And our teeth forever frozen in mid-gnash. **THE END**

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THE MASTERS

By URSULA K. LeGUIN

The black numbers fantasied through his brain, and the piddling uses of the Comparing Sticks dwindled into insignificance. But there was a price to pay for knowledge.

IN darkness a man stood alone, naked, holding a smoking torch. The reddish glow lit air and ground for only a few feet; beyond that was the darkness, the immeasurable. From moment to moment there was a rush of wind, a half-glimpsed glitter of eyes, a vast muttering: "Hold it higher!" The man obeyed, though the torch shook in his shaking hands. He raised it clear above his head, while the darkness rushed and jabbered around him, closing in. The wind blew colder, the red flame guttered. His rigid arms began to quiver, then to jerk a little; his face was oily with sweat; he barely heard the soft, huge jabbering, "Hold it up, up, hold it up . . ." The current of time had stopped; only the whispering grew and grew till it was a howling, and still, horribly, nothing touched him, nothing came within the circle of light. "Now walk!" the great voice howled, "Walk forward!"

The torch above his head, he stepped forward on the ground he could not see. It was not there. With a scream for help, he fell, darkness and thunder about him, the torch he would not let go flaming backward into his eyes.

Time . . . time, and light, and pain, they had all started again. He was crouching in some kind of ditch, on all fours in the mud. His face stung and his eyes, in this bright light, were full of fog. He looked up from his mud-blotched nakedness to a blurred, radiant figure standing above him. Light fell in glory on white hair, the long folds of a white cloak. The eyes gazed at

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Ganil, the voice spoke to him: "You lie in the grave. You lie in the Grave of Knowledge. So lie your forefathers forever beneath the ashes of the fires of Hell." The voice swelled out: "O fallen Man, arise!" Ganil managed to get to his feet. The white figure was pointing: "That is the light of Human Reason. It guided you to the grave. Drop it." Ganil realized he was still holding a mud-sodden black stick, the torch; he let it fall. "Now rise," the white figure cried in a slow exaltation, "rise from darkness and walk in the light of Common Day!" Hands reached to Ganil, helping and hauling him up. Men knelt offering him basins and sponges, others towelled him, rubbed him down till he stood clean and warm, a grey cloak round his shoulders, amid the chatting and laughter, coming and going, in the bright spacious hall. A bald man clapped his shoulder. "Come on, time for the Oath."

DID I—did I do all right?"

"Fine! Only you held up that damn fool torch so long. Thought you'd keep us growling around in the dark all day. Come on." They led him over black pavement and under the very lofty, white-beamed ceiling, to a curtain that dropped, pure white, in a few straight folds, thirty feet from roof to floor

"Curtain of Mystery," somebody said to Ganil in a matter-of-fact tone. Laughing and talking had died away, they stood all round him, silent. In silence the white curtain parted. Ganil stared foggily at what was revealed: a high Altar, a long table, and an old man in white.

"Postulant, will you swear our Oath with us?"

Somebody nudged Ganil, whispering, "I will."—"I will," Ganil stuttered.

"Swear then, Masters of the Rite!" The old man raised up a shape of silver: an X-cross, supported by an iron shaft. "Under the Cross of the Common Day I swear never to reveal the rites and mysteries of my Lodge—"

"Under the Cross . . . I swear . . . the rites . . ." muttered all the men around Ganil, and propelled by another nudge he muttered with them.

"To live well, to work well, to think well—" As Ganil finished repeating this a voice whispered in his ear, "Don't swear."

"To avoid all heresies, to betray all necromancers to the Courts of College, and to obey the High Masters of my Lodge from now forth till my death—" Mutter, mutter. Some seemed to be repeating the long passage, some not; Ganil, confused, muttered a word or two and then stood silent.

"And I swear never to teach

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Illustrator ADKINS

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the Mysteries of Machinery to any gentile. I swear this beneath the Sun." A grating rumble almost drowned their voices. Slowly, crankily, a section of the roof was swinging back to reveal the yellow-grey, cloud-covered sky of summer. "Behold the Light of Common Day!" the old man in white cried out, triumphant, and Ganil stared up at it. The machinery apparently stuck before the skylight was fully open; there was a loud clanking of gears, then silence. The old man came forward, kissed Ganil on both cheeks, and said, "Welcome, Master Ganil, to the Inner Rite of the Mystery of the Machine." The initiation was over. Ganil was a Master of his Lodge.

MEAN burn you got there," the bald fellow said as they all walked back down the hall. Ganil put up his hand and found that his left cheek and temple were raw and sore. "Lucky it missed your eye."

"Just missed being blinded by the light of Reason, eh?" said a soft voice. Glancing round Ganil saw a fair man, with brown hair and blue eyes, actually blue, like those of an albino cat or a blind horse. He looked away from the deformity at once, but the fair man went on in his soft voice, the voice that had whispered "Don't swear" during the taking of the oath, "I'm Mede Fairman. I'll be your Co-Master in Lee's shop. Feel like getting a beer when we're out of here?"

The dank beer-dreggy warmth of the tavern was a queer change from all the terror and ceremony of the day. Ganil felt dizzy. Mede Fairman drank off half a tankard, wiped foam pleasurably off his mouth, and inquired, "What d'you think of the initiation?"

"It was—it was—"

"Humbling?"

"Yes," Ganil agreed. "Really humbling."

"Humiliating, even," the blue-eyed man suggested, and finished off his tankard.

"Yes. A—a great mystery." Perplexed, Ganil stared down into his beer. Mede smiled and said in his soft voice, "I know. Drink up, now. I think you ought to have an Apothecary look at that burn." Ganil obediently followed him out into the evening, into the narrow streets thronged with pedestrians, horse-carts, ox-carts, chuffing motor-carts. In the Merchantsplace the booths of the artisans were being closed for the night, and down High Street the great doors of the Shops and Lodges were already barred. Here and there the overhung, elbowing houses were parted by the blank yellow facade of a temple, marked with one plain circle of polished brass. In the dull, brief summer twilight under the unmoving clouds

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the black-haired, bronze-skinned people of the Common Day crowded and idled and pushed and talked and cursed and laughed, and Ganil, dizzy from fatigue and pain and strong beer, kept close beside Mede as if, for all his own new Masterhood, this blue-eyed stranger were his only guide.

* * *

"XVI plus IXX," Ganil said impatiently, "What the devil, boy, can't you add." The apprentice flushed red. "Isn't it XXXVI, then, Master Ganil?" he asked feebly. For answer Ganil jammed one of the rods the boy had been machining into its place in the steam-engine that was being repaired; it was too long by an inch.

"It's because my rule of thumb's so long, sir," the boy said, displaying his knobby hands. The distance between first and second thumbjoint was in fact unusually long. "So it is," Ganil said. His dark face darkened. "Very interesting. But it doesn't matter how long your inch is so long as you use it consistently. And what matters, you blockhead, is that XVI and IXX don't make XXXVI, never have, never can, never will till the world ends—you incompetent gentile!"

"Yes, sir. It's so hard to remember, sir."

"It's intended to be hard to remember, Wanno Prentice," said a deep voice: Lee the Shopmaster, a fat deep-chested man with bright black eyes. "Come over here a minute, Ganil." Leading him to a quieter corner of the great workshop, Lee went on cheerfully, "You're a bit impatient, Master Ganil."

"Wanno should know his addition-tables."

"Even Masters forget an addition now and then, you know." Lee patted Ganil's shoulder in a fatherly way. "Why, you sounded for a moment there as if you expected him to compute it!" He laughed aloud, a fine bass laugh through which his eyes gleamed merrily and with infinite shrewdness. "Take it easy, that's all . . . I understand you're coming for dinner next Altarday Eve?"

"I took the liberty—"

"Fine, fine! More power to you. Wish she'd take on a good steady fellow like you. But I give you fair warning. My daughter's a willful hussy." Again the Master laughed, and Ganil grinned, a little ruefully. The Shopmaster's daughter Lani had not only most of the young men of the Shop, but also her father, twisted right round her little finger. A clever, quicksilver girl, she had at first rather scared Ganil. It took him a while to notice that she spoke, to him only, with a certain shyness, a hint almost of

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pleading. He had finally got up courage to ask a dinner-invitation from her mother, the recognized first step of a courtship. He stood now where Lee had left him, thinking of Lani's smile.

"Ganil, have you ever seen the Sun?"

It was a low voice, dry and easy. He turned, meeting his friend's blue eyes.

"The Sun? Yes, of course I have."

"When was the last time?"

"Let's see, I was twenty-six; four years ago. Weren't you here in Edun then? It came out in late afternoon, and that night there were stars. I counted eighty-one, I remember, before the sky closed."

"I was up north in Keling then in my first Mastership." Mede leaned against the wooden guardrail of the model heavy-steam-engine as he spoke. His light eyes looked away from the busy shop, out the windows at the fine, steady rain of late autumn. "Heard you telling off young Wanno just now . . . 'What matters is that XVI and IXX don't make XXXVI . . . When I was twenty-six, four years ago . . . I counted eighty-one stars . . .' A little more and you'd be computing, Ganil."

Ganil frowned, unconsciously rubbing the whitish scar on his temple. "Well, hell, Mede! even gentiles know IV from XXX!"

MEDE smiled faintly. He had his Comparing Stick in his hand, and lowering it he drew on the dusty floor a round shape. "What's that?" he asked.

"The Sun."

"Right. It's also a . . . a figure. A number. The figure for Nothing."

"The figure for Nothing?"

"Yes. You could use it in the subtraction-tables, for instance. I from II leaves I, right? But what does II from II leave?" A pause. He tapped the circle with his stick. "That."

"Yes, of course." Ganil stared down at the circle, the sacred image of the Sun, the Hidden Light, the Face of God. "Is that priest-knowledge."

"No." Mede drew an X-cross over the circle. "That is."

"Then what—whose knowledge is the—the figure for Nothing?"

"No one's. Anyone's. It's not a mystery." Ganil frowned in surprise at this statement. They spoke in low voices, standing close as if discussing a measurement on Mede's Comparing Stick. "Why did you count the stars, Ganil?"

"I . . . I wanted to know. I've always liked counting, numbers, the tables. That's why I'm a Mechanic."

"Yes. You're thirty, aren't you, you've been a Master for four months now. Did you ever

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think, Ganil, that to be a Master means you have learned everything your trade can teach? From now on until your death you'll learn nothing more. There is no more."

"But the Shopmasters—"

"Shopmasters learn some secret signals and passwords," Mede said in his soft, dry voice, "and of course they have power. But they know no more than you . . . You thought perhaps they were allowed to compute, didn't you? They aren't."

Ganil was silent.

"And yet there are things to be learned, Ganil."

"Where?"

"Outside."

There was a long pause.

"I can't listen to this, Mede. Don't speak of it again. I won't betray you." Ganil turned and walked away, his face harsh with anger. With all his will he turned that confused and struggling anger against Mede, a man as deformed of mind as of body, an evil counsellor, a lost friend.

* * *

It had been a pleasant evening: Lee jovial, his fat wife motherly, and Lani shy and radiant. Ganil's youthful gravity made her tease him, but even in her teasing was that pleading, yielding note; another moment, it seemed, and all her verve would turn to tenderness. Passing a dish at table once her hand had for an instant touched his. He still knew exactly where, there, the side of his right hand near the wrist, one soft touch. He moaned luxuriously as he lay in bed in his room over the shop in the utter blackness of the city night. Oh Lani, soft touch of a hand, of lips—Oh Lord, Lord. Courtship was a long business, eight months at least, going from step to step as one must with a Master's daughter. Ganil had to get his mind off this unendurable sweetness. Think of nothing, he told himself firmly, go to sleep. Think of nothing . . . And he thought of nothing. The circle. The round empty circle. What was I times O? The same as II times O. What if you put I beside O, what would that figure be, IO?

MEDE Fairman sat up in bed, brown hair lank over groggy blue eyes, and tried to focus on the person crashing around his room. The first dirty-yellow light of dawn showed at the window. "This is Altarday," he growled, "go away, I'm sleepy." The vague figure resolved into Ganil, the crashing into a whisper. "Mede!" Ganil kept whispering, "look!" He stuck a slate under "Mede's nose. "Look, look what you can do with that figure for Nothing—"

"Oh, that," said Mede. He pushed Ganil and the slate away,

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went and dunked his head in the basin of icy water on his clothes-chest, and kept it there a while. He returned dripping to sit on the bed. "Let's see."

"See, you can use any number for a base, I used XII because it's handy. XII becomes I-O, see, and XIII is I-I, then when you get up to XXIV—"

"Sh."

Mede studied the slate. Finally he said, "Will you remember this?" and at Ganil's nod, wiped the neat crowded figures off the slate with a rub of his sleeve. "I hadn't realized that one could use any base . . . But look, use the base X, I'll tell you why in a minute, and here's a device that makes it easier. Now X will be IO, and XI will be II, but for XII, write this," and he wrote on the slate, 12.

GANIL stared at the figure. At last he said in a peculiar struggling voice, "Isn't that one of the black numbers?"

"Yes, it is. Now you see Ganil, all you've done is to come at the black numbers by the back door."

Ganil sat beside Mede, silently absorbing his words.

"What's CXX times MCC?" Mede inquired.

"The tables don't go that high."

"Watch." Mede wrote on the slate:

```
  1200
   120
------
```

and then as Ganil watched,

```
  0000
 2400
1200
------
144000
```

Another long pause. "Three Nothings . . . XII times itself . . . Give me the slate," Ganil muttered. Then after a silence broken only by the patter of rain and the squeak of chalk on slate, "What's the black number for VIII?"

By twilight of that cold Altarday they had gone as far as Mede could take Ganil. Indeed Ganil had gone farther than Mede could follow him. "You must meet Yin," the fair man said. "He can teach you what you need. Yin works with angles, triangles, measurements. He can measure the distance between any two points, points you can't reach, using his triangles. He is a great Learner. Numbers are the heart of this knowledge, the language of it."

"And my own language."

"Yes, it is. Not mine. I don't love numbers for themselves. I want to use them. To explain things . . . For instance, if you throw a ball, what makes the ball move?"

"Your throwing it." Ganil grinned. White as a sheet—much whiter than Mede's sheets—his

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head ringing with sixteen straight hours of mathematics minus meals or sleep, he had lost all fear, all humanity. His smile was that of a king come home from exile.

"Fine," said Mede. "Why does it *keep on* moving?"

"Because . . . because the air holds it up?"

"Then why does it ever fall? Why does it follow a curve? What kind of curve is it? Do you see how I need your numbers?" It was Mede who now looked like a king, an angry king with an empire too immense to control. "And they talk about Mysteries," he snorted, "in their little shuttered shops! —Here, come on, let's get some dinner and go see Yin."

BUILT right up against the city wall, the tall old house peered from leaded windows at the two young Masters down in the street. Sulfurous late-autumn twilight hung over the steep slate roofs shining with rain. "Yin was a Machine-Master like us," Mede told Ganil as they waited at the iron-barred door, "retired now, you'll see why. Men from all the Lodges come here, Apothecaries, weavers, Masons. Even some artisans. One butcher. He cuts up dead cats." Mede spoke with amused tolerance, as physicists generally speak of biologists. Now the door swung open, and a servant took them upstairs to a room where logs glowed on a great hearth, and a man rose from a highbacked oaken chair to greet them.

Ganil thought at once of the Overmaster of his Lodge, the figure that had cried down to him in his grave, "Arise." Yin too was old and tall, and wore the white cloak of the high Masters. But he stooped, and his face was creased and weary as an old hound's. He held out his left hand to greet them. His right arm ended in a long-healed, shiny stump at the wrist.

"This is Ganil," Mede was saying. "He invented the duodecimal system last night. Get him working on the mathematics of curves for me, Master Yin."

Yin laughed, an old man's short, soft laugh. "Welcome, Ganil. From now on, come here when you please. We're all necromancers here, we practise the black arts. Or try to . . . Come freely, day or night. And go freely. If we're betrayed, so be it. We must trust one another. Mystery belongs to no man; we're not keeping a secret, but practising an art. Does that make sense to you?"

Ganil nodded. Words never came easily to him, only numbers. And he found himself very moved, which embarrassed him. This was no solemn symbolic

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Initiation and Oath, but only an old man talking quietly.

"Good," said Yin, as if Ganil's nod has been quite sufficient. "Some wine, young Masters, or ale? My dark ale came out first-rate this year. So you like numbers, do you, Ganil?"

IN early spring Ganil stood in the shop supervising Wanno as the prentice took measurements onto his Comparing Stick from the model of the hauling-cart engine. Ganil's face was grim. He had changed over these few months, looked older, more resolute, harder. Four hours' sleep a night plus the invention of algebra might well change a man.

"Master Ganil?" said a shy voice.

"Repeat that measurement," he told Wano, and then turned questioningly to the girl. Lani too had changed. Her face looked a little cross, a little forlorn, and she spoke to Ganil with real timidity. He had taken the second step of courtship, the three evening calls, and then becoming absorbed in his work with Yin, had gone no further. No man had ever dropped Lani in the middle of a courtship. No man had ever looked right through her, as he was doing now. What was it he saw, when he looked through her? She was wild to know that, to get at his secret, to get at him. In a vague, unquantifiable way he knew this, and was sorry for Lani, and a little afraid of her.

She was watching Wanno. "Do they . . . do you ever change those measurements?" she asked, trying to make conversation.

"To change a Model is the heresy of Invention."

That ended that. "My father wanted me to tell you the Shop will be shut tomorrow."

"Shut? Why's that?"

"The College has announced there's a west wind rising, and the Sun may come out tomorrow."

"Good! A good beginning for the spring, eh? Thanks." And he turned back to the model.

The Priests of the College had for once been right. Weather prediction, on which they spent most of their waking hours, was a thankless task. But once in ten tries or so they caught a Sun, and this was one of the times. By noon the rains had ceased and the cloud-cover was paling beginning to boil and flow slowly eastward. By mid-afternoon all the people of Edun were out on the streets and squares, on chimneypots and rooftrees, on the wall and the fields beyond the wall, watching; the Priests of the College had begun their ceremonial dance, bowing and interweaving on the great forecourt of the College; priests stood

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ready in every temple to pull chains that would open the roofs so that the Sun's light might strike the altar-stones. And in late afternoon at last the sky opened. Between ragged smoking edges of yellow-grey appeared a streak of blue. A sigh, a soft tremendous murmur rose up from the streets, squares, windows, roofs, walls of the city of Edun: "Heaven, heaven . . ."

The rent in the sky widened. A shower of rain spattered over the city, blown aslant on the fresh wind, and suddenly the raindrops glittered, as at night in torchlight; but this glory they reflected was the glory of the Sun. To westward it stood, all alone in heaven, blinding.

GANIL stood with the others, face lifted. On his face, on the scar of his burn, he felt the heat of the Sun. He stared at it till his eyes swam with tears, the Circle of Fire, and the face of God . . .

"What is the Sun?"

That was Mede's soft voice, remembered. A cold midwinter night, he and Mede and Yin and the others talking before the fire in Yin's house. "Is it a circle, or a sphere? Why does it cross the sky? And how big is it—how far away is it. Ah, to think that once all a man had to do to see the Sun was lift up his head . . ."

Flutes and drums throbbed, a gay faint sound, away off at the College. Sometimes cloud-fragments blew across the intolerable face and the world turned grey and chill again, the flutes stopped; but the west wind blew, the clouds passed and the Sun reappeared, always a little lower. Just before it sank into the heavy cloud-rack in the west it was growing red and one could look at it without pain. In those moments it certainly looked to Ganil's eyes not like a disk but like an enormous, haze-warped, slowly falling ball.

It fell, was gone.

Overhead through the torn sky glimpses of heaven still shone, infinitely clear and deep, blue-green. Then westward near where the Sun had set, at the edge of a mounting cloud, gleamed one bright point: the evening star. "Look!" Ganil cried, but few turned to look. The Sun was set, what did stars matter. The yellowish haze, part of the single windingsheet of cloud that had covered earth with its mantle of dust and rain ever since Hellfire fourteen generations ago, moved up over the star, erased it. Ganil sighed, rubbed his neck that was stiff with craning back, and started home along with all the other people of the Common Day.

* * *

He was arrested that night.

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From guards and fellow-prisoners (all his Shop was in jail with him except the Shopmaster Lee) he learned that his crime was that of knowing Mede Fairman. Mede stood accused of heresy. He had been seen out on the fields pointing an instrument at the Sun, a device, they said, for measuring distances. He had been trying to measure the distance between the earth and God.

The prentices were soon let go. On the third day guards came for Ganil, bringing him out into one of the enclosed courts of the College, into the soft, fine rain of early spring. Priests lived almost wholly out of doors, and the great complex of Edun College was only a series of meager barracks surrounding the roofless sleeping-courts, writing-courts, prayer-courts, eating-courts, and courts of law. Into one of these they brought Ganil, forcing him on between the ranks of men robed in white and yellow that filled it, until he stood in front of them all. He saw a clear space, an Altar, a long table shining wet with rain, and behind it a priest in the golden robe of the High Mystery. At the far end of the table was another man who like Ganil was flanked by guards. This man was looking at Ganil, a straight look, cold and blank; yet they were blue eyes, the same blue as heaven above the clouds.

"Ganil Kalson of Edun, you are suspect as an acquaintance of Mede Fairman, accused of the heresies of Invention and Computation. You were this man's friend."

"We were Co-Masters—"

"Yes. Did he ever speak to you of measurements made without Comparing Sticks?"

"No."

"Of black numbers?"

"No."

"Of the black arts?"

"No."

"Master Ganil, you've answered No three times. Do you know the Order of the Priest-Masters of the Mystery of the Law concerning suspects in heresy?"

"No, I don't—"

"The Order says: If the suspect shall deny the questions four times, the questions may be repeated with use of the hand-press until answered. I shall now repeat, unless you wish to retract one of your denials."

"No," Ganil said, confused, looking round him at the crowded blank faces, the high walls. When they had brought out a squat wooden machine of some kind and had locked his right hand into it, he was still more confused than scared. What was all this mumbo-jumbo? It was like his initiation, when they had worked so hard to frighten him; that time they had succeeded.

"As a Mechanic," the golden

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priest was saying, "you know the use of the lever, Master Ganil. Will you retract?"

"No," Ganil said, frowning a little. He had noticed that his right arm now seemed to end at the wrist, like Yin's.

"Very well." One of the guards put his hands on the lever sticking out of the wooden box, and the golden priest said, "Were you a friend of Mede Fairman?"

"No," Ganil said. He said No to each question even after he had ceased to hear the priest's voice; he went on saying No till he heard his own voice mixed with the clapping echo from the walls above the courtyard, No, no, no, no.

THE light came and went, the rain fell cold on his face and ceased, somebody kept trying to help him stand up. His grey cloak stank, he had been sick with pain. At the thought, he was sick again. "Take it easy, now," a guard was whispering to him. The motionless white and yellow ranks were still crowded there, the faces set, the eyes staring . . . but not at him now.

"Heretic, do you know this man?"

"He is my Co-Master."

"Did you speak to him of the black arts?"

"Yes."

"Did you teach him the black arts?"

"No. I tried to." The voice cracked a little; even in the silence of the courtyard, over only the whisper of the rain, it was hard to hear Mede speak. "He was too stupid. He dared not and could not learn. He'll make a fine Shopmaster." The cold blue eyes looked straight at Ganil without pity or appeal.

The golden priest turned to face the court again. "There is no evidence against the suspect Ganil. You may go, suspect. Come here at noon tomorrow to witness the execution of judgment. Failure to come will be taken as proof of your guilt." Before he understood, the guards had led Ganil out of the courtyard. They left him at a side door of the College, barring the door behind him with a clang. He stood there a while, then crouched down on the pavement, pressing his blackened, blood-caked hand against his side under his cloak. Rain whispered around him. No one passed. It was not till dusk that he pulled himself up and walked, street by street, house by house, step by step, across the city to Yin's house.

In the shadows of the doorway a shadow moved, spoke: "Ganil!" He stopped. "Ganil, I don't care if you're suspect. It's all right. Come back home with me. My father will take you back into the shop. He will if *I* ask him."

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Ganil did not answer.

"Come with me. I waited for you, I knew you'd come here, I've followed you before." Her nervous, jubilant laugh died away.

"Let me by, Lani."

"No. Why do you come to old Yin's house? Who lives here? Who is she? Come back with me, you have to, my father won't take a suspect back into his shop, unless I—"

Yin's door was never locked. Ganil brushed past her and went in, shutting it behind him. No servant came; the house was dark, silent. They had all been taken, all the Learners, they would all be questioned and tortured and killed.

"Who's that?"

YIN stood on the stair-landing, lamplight bright on his white hair. He came to Ganil and helped him up the stairs. Ganil spoke very fast: "I was followed here, a girl from the shop, Lee's daughter, if she tells him he'll recognize your name, he'll send the guards here—"

"I sent the others away three days ago." At the sound of Yin's voice Ganil stopped, stared at the old man's creased, quiet face, and then said childishly, "Look," holding out his right hand, "look, like yours."

"Yes. Come sit down, Ganil."

"They condemned him. Not me, they let me go. He said he couldn't teach me, I couldn't learn. To save me—"

"And your mathematics. Come here now, sit down."

Ganil got control of himself, and obeyed. Yin made him lie down, then did what he could about cleaning and bandaging his hand. Then, sitting down between Ganil and the glowing fire, he gave a wheezy sigh. "Well," he said, "now you're a heresy suspect. I've been one for twenty years. You get used to it . . . Don't worry about our friends. But if the girl tells Lee and your name gets linked with mine . . . We'd better leave Edun. Separately. But tonight."

Ganil said nothing. To leave his shop without the Overmaster's permission meant excommunication, the loss of his mastership. He would be barred from his own trade. What could he do, with his crippled hand, where could he go? He had never been out of Edun in his life.

The dead silence of the house spread out above and below them. Ganil strained to hear sounds down in the street, the tramping of a troop of guards come to re-arrest him. He had to get out, to get away, tonight—

"I can't," he said abruptly. "I have to be—to be at the College tomorrow, at noon."

Yin knew what he meant. Again the dead silence closed

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round them. The old man's voice was weary when he finally spoke. "That's the condition of your release, eh? All right; go do it; you don't want them hunting you through the Forty Towns as a condemned heretic. A suspect isn't hunted, merely outcast. Get some sleep now, Ganil. I'll meet you in Keling. Leave as soon as you can; and travel light . . ."

* * *

When Ganil left the house late in the morning, however, he carried something with him, a roll of papers hidden under his cloak, each sheet covered edge to edge with Mede Fairman's clear writing: "Trajectories," "Speed of Falling Bodies," "The Nature of Motion . . ." He had seen none of the other Learners. Only riff-raff and the idle and the women gathered to see à heretic die. A priest ordered Ganil to stand at the very front of the crowd.

They brought Mede out just before noon. Ganil glimpsed his face; it was very white, all his deformity exposed, the atavistic pallor of skin, hair, eyes. There was no drawing-out of the scene; a gold-robed priest raised his crossed arms in invocation to the Sun that stood, unseen, at noon behind the pall of clouds, and as he lowered his arms torches were set to the stacks of wood round the stake. Smoke curled up, the same grey-yellow as the clouds. Ganil stood with his injured hand in its sling pressed hard against the roll of papers under his cloak, repeating silently, "Let the smoke suffocate him first . . ." But the wood was dry and caught quickly. He felt the heat on his face, on his scarred temple. Beside him a young priest tried to draw back, could not because of the pressing, staring, sighing crowd, and stood still, swaying a little and breathing in gasps. The smoke was thick now, hiding the flames and the figure among them. But Ganil could hear his voice, not soft now, loud, very loud. He heard it, he forced himself to hear it, but at the same time he listened in his spirit to a steady voice, soft, continuing: "What is the Sun? Why does it cross the sky? . . . Do you see how I need your numbers . . . For XII, write 12 . . . This is also a figure, the figure for Nothing."

The screaming had stopped, but the soft voice had not.

Ganil raised his head. The crowd was drifting away; the young priest knelt on the pavement by him, praying and sobbing aloud. Ganil glanced up at the heavy sky and then set off alone out through the city gate, northward, into exile and towards his home.

THE END

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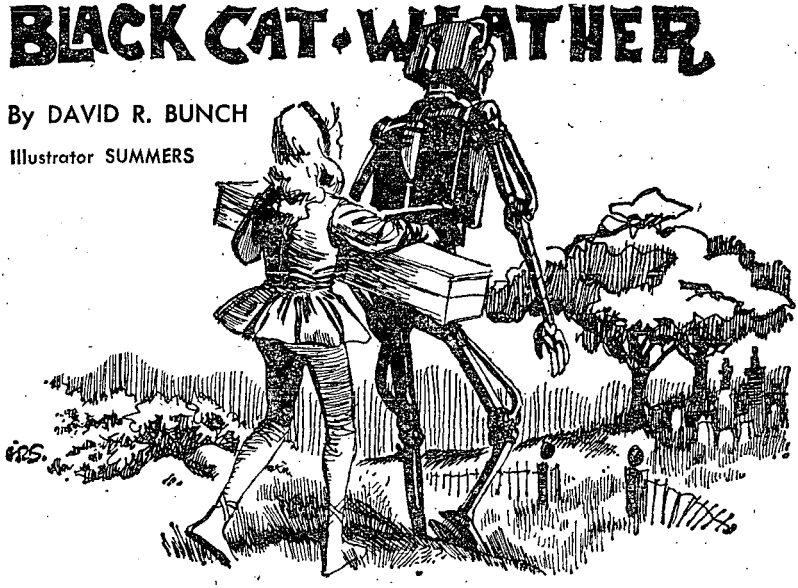
There are many things in the Good Long Rest that should not be disturbed. Especially in . . .

BLACK CAT WEATHER

By DAVID R. BUNCH

Illustrator SUMMERS



IT was in black cat weather and jack-o'-lantern times that she stood beneath my window, hallooing, holding five long slim boxes stacked in her scabbing arms. A vague iron shadow over by the fence was holding some object that a little resembled a boat.

"Daddy," she yelled, "come see what we have brought to you. And there's lots more. Over in Good Long Rest. And think how many more—all over, in all the others. And think how many more . . . Come see!"

Of course I knew that her five boxes contained nothing really, at least not anything you could —well, not anything. And of course iron Mox was carrying one of the THINGS out of Good Long Rest. Entirely forbidden . . .

I arose from my hip-patty chair, the good den lounger, the

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gentle undulater, where I sit mostly now, one-childed and wifeless, the Calm Waiter, and think on Universal Deep Questions, problems of the world. I chewed at my throat with the fixer, probing and prying, trying to ease some at the place that was worked all in gold against cancer, and I said in my pre-planned speech, working hard with my mouth, following along with the tapes, "Daphalene! you are not to take the iron Mox with you anymore to Good Long Rest. Because he gets the THINGS! Even though I set him on Dumb Servant, Alternate Set, he still somehow changes to Human Set and goes for the THINGS.—I don't care if you want to take those long stocking boxes down there alone day in and day out three hundred and sixty-five days a year for the twenty-five next years and bring back—well, bring back whatever it is you say you find down there. But no more of this stuff of Mox and the big dirty damp THINGS. Understand?

"And Mox!" Mox came lumbering in on his blunt boat-shaped feet, holding a big box lightly out to me as though it contained something I wanted. When I did not take it at once, he dropped it at my feet and shook his arms high up into himself until his iron hands were hanging like calm leaves from his shoulder beams, a strange shrug. Then he flapped his hands and flashed his bulb eyes on and off in his usual greeting manner. "Skip the fawn stuff," I snapped. "Flick off your Human switch, Mox, and go on Dumb Servant, Alternate Set switch. Now!" He complied. "Pick up that dirty THING you dropped almost on my feet." He did that. "Back to Good Long Rest," I ordered. "And fix! Fix so no one knows you've disturbed."

THEY disappeared into the black-cream night, and my throat being tired from the shouting, and without tape fixed now to yell Daphalene to come back, they both walked away, an iron thought-tape thinker and a little girl wading into the shadowless thick dark under a moonless low sky and clouds on the edge of late October rain. She was Daphalene, my-daughter Daphalene in the monster times, in the times when strange machines and strange mutants roamed the homeless plastic, juggling their switches and angers. In an age past the age for virtue, or even a try, I let her run with the iron tape-fed thinker as the lesser of many evils, in her springtime, gathering what experiences she would against, in our times, the dark tendency toward hopelessness wide and

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thick and tall as the rubbery wet sky above us. I tried to teach her nothing. In due time she would grow to "replacements" and part by part her flesh would go for metal and plastic in the new great surgery and what remained would be fed with the intro-ven. But now let her, motherless, go with her stocking boxes into the deep night following the thought-taped thinker, and let her cope with her loneliness and her grow-up problems as best she might until, finally, hard and firm and unshockably "replaced" she'd be a woman to survive!

Good Long Rest was a cemetery.—When she came back, perhaps I would leave my hip-patty chair long enough to go to her. Perhaps, faking, I would take one of her stocking boxes and look inside, pretending interest. And perhaps there would be, for once, lightning bugs fluttering and flashing in the long hollow dark of the stocking box. And then I could say with my fatherly tape, against the gold block for the cancer, "Why Daphalene, how nice. You have been out catching the bug lights in the great night of this cemetery world like a normal little-child-player should. Just as I told you to do. Against the long dark a little spark. How nice! And you have brought them, in boxes burning and chafing your scabbing little arms, all up to me, your daddy. How nice nice nice nice . . ."

I find it best to have my speech preset these days, the tape tape-planned, so all will go smoothly around the gold block for the cancer. Sometimes, caught off balance, the tape wrong or not ready, and circumstances changed, my words go past the situation in a kind of silly commentary, and weird beyond all imagining, because circumstances, for which one cannot always preplan, can change speech need. Circumstances should not do that to me, I feel, but they do. And whereas, overall, I should be, cautiously, saying less and less these days, I find myself loudly saying more and more all the time, making my plans in hopes and letting the comments flow up the gold flue in a challenge at black conditions—pleas, really.

AGAINST the noise of iron feet in the night and the soft *chuff-chuff* of little-girl shoes moving I let my monster throat start its trial run. My words beat like flailing clods in the gold stovepipe where should have been supple workings of thought sound. "HELLO," it shouted at the dark. And then they were lumps in view. He was a tall square hump over by the plastic pear tree; she was a much

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smaller and slenderer blob in the dark, a little apart from him, toward me. I sprang toward her, my mouth going hard at the words I had planned, "Why Daphalene, how nice nice nice . . . You have been—"

She thrust a stocking box up to me, and for one ice-struck ice-stark moment her eyes fathomed into mine under the rays of the beamo light that was just then circling past from my rooftop. The beamos were cutting across our yard from the other rooftops too, criss-crossing the tops of him and her in alternating shakes of light and thick dark. I saw he was fluttering his hinge arms up and down in his shoulder holes. She was straining quietly as a stone.

The stocking box in my hand was heavy. Nothing fluttered in it; no lights pulsed in its housed darkness. I waited for the next sweep of my beamo, holding the box where I thought the ray would pass. It swept across something white and cold and dead of eye in the box. Daphalene waited, upthrust there like a pedestal, with her scabbed hands wrap-twisted. Mox was hinging and unhinging the full length of his arms still. And my throat, strangely, felt an old ache that was not all from the gold part of my voice trough.

I let the beamo pass again across the white thing in the box, and amid an ice-mist feeling along all of my flesh-strips quivering I suddenly realized. At the third sweep I held it out until I could see the jag places where Mox had sundered it from its spot where it had for five years rested upon a gravestone flower-and-angel-burdened in Good Long Rest. At the fourth sweep I threw it hard as I could at the iron sheet I stood on. The whizzing beamos from the many rooftops caught flashes of shattering white, and my throat ached so from an old ache that I could not finish my preplanned conversation. And a white eye smote me with a smooth chalky stare of cold—cold. Then the iron Mox, suddenly quitting that silly business of hinging and unhinging his arms, bent squarely, through the big hinges in his waist loop only, and lifted a THING from the ground. "It's her!" Daphalene shrieked with a cry of celebration. "You had his switch on Servant, so I just ordered him to do it. He's found Mother!"

As I collapsed quietly across the white dust of an angel, the iron Mox and the frightened little girl again slipped cemetery-ward, into the gummy dark, guessing they had not pleased me. **THE END**

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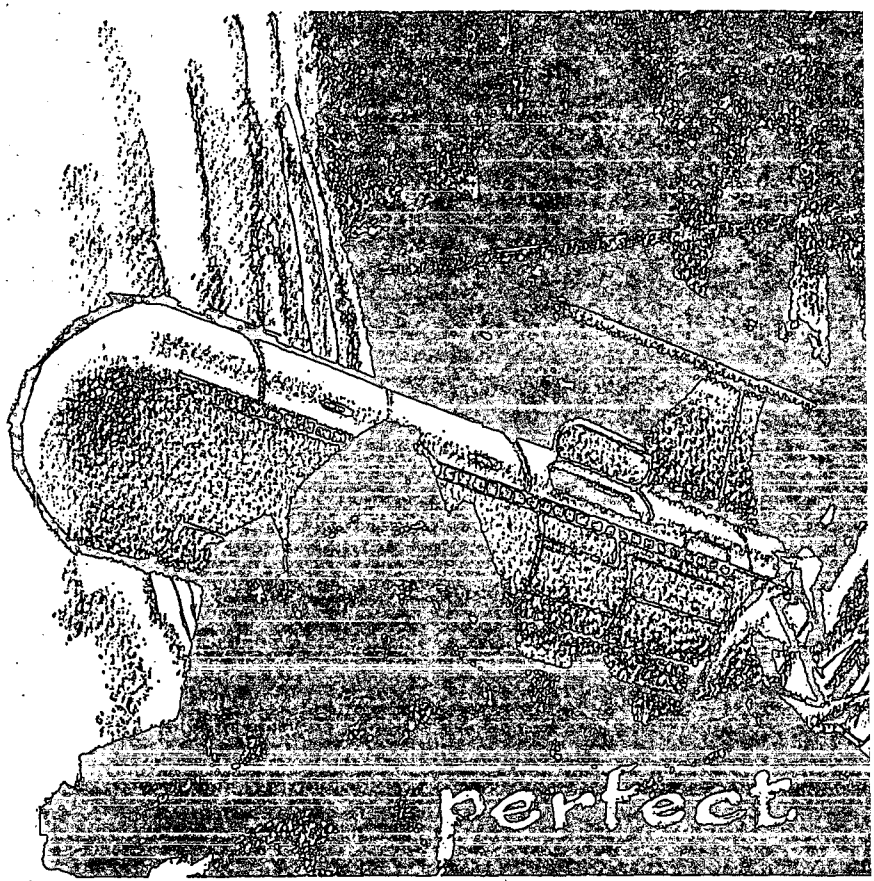

It seemed there was a way the Grull could be defeated. But neither the general nor the psych people could understand it. Neither could the Grull. That's why they were coming back.

by JACK EGAN

Illustrator SCHELLING

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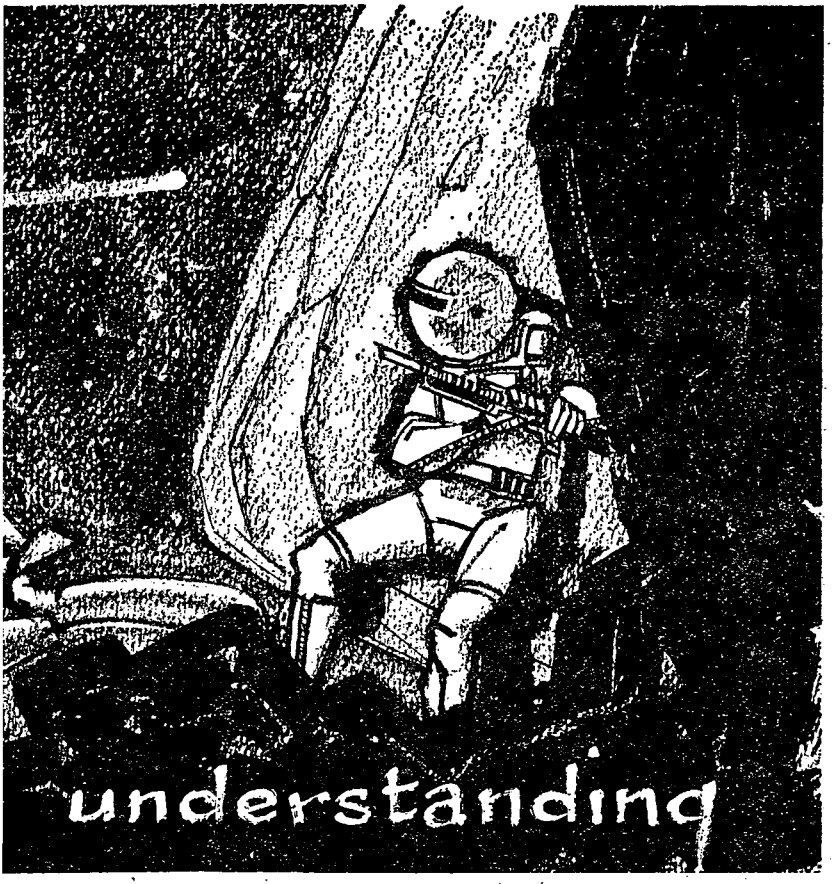

THE valley was black and cold with a thick hoarfrost, guarded by the enameled abyss of space. Ed Lockhardt dialed up his thermovers another notch and settled back against the frost-coated outjut of stone. He cradled the hand laser on his knees, photosensors full on, peering down the rifle sights of the valley to its only entrance. Out there, somewhere, and getting closer every moment, were the Grull.

He closed his eyes, and they would have been grey had there been enough light to see them, tired of the endless panorama of the star sea, of the ragged, jagged Pandemonium supporting

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that vastness. Dispassionately, for there was no room for emotion now, he reviewed the fiery death of the *Klystron* against the swirling miasma of Venus. And it was—a funny thing, now that he had time (*oh, so much time*) to think about it. He had jumped ship at first sight of the oncoming Grull, panicked by their size and speed and grace of maneuver. The little L-boat (the one lying, fuel expent, not far down that gouge of a valley) had barely made Mercury, though he utilized to the best of his ability the sun's gravity. Skimming in tight around the equator, he had slammed down into darkness with barely a check of his landing spot. In any case, it wouldn't have mattered. He had used every drop of water aboard the L-boat to get this far, feeding it milliliter at a time into the thermotubes.

AND here he was, Ed Lockhardt, ace-Cruiser pilot of the United Sirian Alliance, stuck in a little-tenanted nook of the Universe with a fleet of hopped-up aliens on his tail. The phonocoms were in A-prime condition, could reach anywhere in the immediate system. But reach what?

Earth?

The island planet haughty in its old age and wisdom.

Ed knew better than to direct signals toward that jealously-guarded pearl. Any suggestion that a ship of the Sirian Alliance was tainting the long-kept peace of the Terran System would bring only the stiffest rebuff from Alliance HQ, if not instantaneous death at the hands of the Terrans themselves. Better by far to take his chances with the Grull here, on a dead planet, where they and their bodiless minds would be at an equal disadvantage. True, the reward of a Grull captive was somewhat less likeable than death, but it was also more unsure. He might outwit them yet.

Something blurred the unwinking stare of Achernar in the River, and Lockhardt jerked his head back. The photosensors automatically increased current; the increment brought into full view the flake of phosphorescence floating high above him. A spynode, sent manhunting by the Grull Commander and his hungry wolfpack. Ed pictured the sleek grey darts hammering in from high above the ecliptic, chasing the lone Sirian spacer, all eyes covetously fixed on the only-too-well protected Utopia of Earth. But the Terrans were invincible, and lone Sirian spacers were not. So here he was, returning the bland stare of a Grull node, his neural shields banging into place, hoping to God he was not too late.

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Presently the silver flake drifted on, passed a ridge of ice-gleaming peaks, and disappeared. Lockhardt heaved a sigh of mitigation, checked his oxygen supply, and found it wanting. So the Grull had missed the cracked-up L-boat this pass. Sooner or later one of their nodes would spot it, and then the whole hairy horde would descend, and give him his one and only chance for escape. But it had to be soon, or he'd be sitting here a pile of protein icicle, when the time came.

Hours dragged by. Ed knocked down his air-intake to the limit, then began to take advantage of the strict mind-training all Cruiser-class pilots must take before the U.S.A. would accept them for . . . extra-duty flights. Such as this one had been. Well, it still was. But not for long. Alliance had said, "Find the Grull." And he, Ed Lockhardt, hitherto unknown second-rate Cruiser pilot, had contracted to supply that demand. And he had—much good it would do him. As it turned out, Grull ships weren't quite as poorly-armed as was popularly believed; nor were they in the least bit timid of the newest model Sirian fleet ships, of which the ill-fated *Klystron* had been a member. Poor ship. It had been a truly remarkable chunk of osmiridium and steel, its positronic brain as closely paralleling his own human personality as was mechanically practical. Life for it had ended there in the polar gravitic planes above Venus; and perhaps just as effectively the Grull had terminated Ed's existence. Free in a skiff because of a miraculous flash of foresight, he had been cut off from all but the most portable of weapons, all food, and from the only real means of communication to be used in a situation such as this: the inter-Galactic Ether Resonator. A truly hopeless situation; and perhaps it was for this reason that he felt so completely devoid of emotion.

SOMETIME later, a second spynode, or possibly it was the same one, came drifting in from another direction. Lockhardt watched it with interest, neural shields well in place, as the phosphor fleck spiraled over the darkness of the valley. It had sensed something, and that something must be the bent-up, battered little emergency cylinder that was the L-boat. The node stopped, hovering, and the photosensors in Ed's helmet showed the blacklight beam flick down and play over the pitted osmiridium hull amid the rocks. It glinted bluely with hoarfrost.

Then he saw them. Five grey, sleek shadows glided around the

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edge of the planet, huge on the close horizon. Lockhardt felt a momentary stab of fear, bracing himself for what was to come.

Grull!

A long, black ripple slammed into the metascreens surrounding Ed's mind with a brain-searing release of neural energy. He rose to his feet and edged into the position behind the outjut of rock he had so carefully picked after landing, surprised at his cold steadiness. The ether was first crackling with Grull propaganda, then with Grull inquisitiveness, and finally with Grull rage. The subvocal chatter emanating from the hulking ships was just under the tonal threshold of Lockhardt's psych, but carried far enough into his consciousness to put across the idea that the enemy had planned on finding him dead in his ship.

Now a search party was put out. Ed had the dubious honor of being the first living human to set eyes on the physical forms of the Grull. A nebulous, swirling cloud leaped an ozonic arc from the side of one ship to the ground beside the L-boat. It glowed with an evil mauve that flickered and flared across the death-cold landscape, raising up malignant shadows that flitted about with some strange life. For the first time since the *Klystron* disintegrated, Lockhardt felt an emotion: fear. The laser rod in his gloved hand trembled with increasing frequency. What could a laser do against a creature such as that?

An increased background hum burned in his head, traveling along the nerve ganglia in an induced current. Lockhardt felt, rather than saw, the Grull discover his presence. The purple miasmic aura settled over his hiding place, blotting out the stars in a thick curtain of tiny, fiery sparks. Ed felt the questing tendrils of the alien mind creep into his psyche, taking up the surface thoughts with puzzled probes; nothing happened until the Grull came up against the neural shield over his logic and speech centers, and simultaneously against the weaker blocks around the optic and audial nerves. Anger flashed from its mind into the continuum. Evidentally a Grull considered secrecy proof of hostility. It demanded, in a mental way, to be let in. In answer, Lockhardt slammed into place all the newest neural blocks the Alliance had devised, covering even his touch sensors in his far-off, cooling toes. Almost instantly he felt the whiplash of carefully, maliciously-directed neural energy. The Grull had been aware of his decision, but a moment too late. Lockhardt cringed mentally under the assault, until he was suddenly certain that the mind-

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locks would hold—at least for the time being. Then he broke out of the hellish aura into the gouged-out landing swath of the L-boat. Down at the ship two other Grull twirled in an eerie dance. He lifted his laser and sent a burst at them. Rock flared and dissipated in a hot vapor. No other effect.

THREE more bursts at the whirlpools and two at the ships convinced Ed that further physical action would be useless. He knew he couldn't put up with the incessant brain battering much longer. Possibly the thought registered on the Grull, because the dim buzzing sound echoed louder in his skull. Lockhardt put his hand against his helmet in a futile gesture to cover his ears. He felt no panic, no fear, no emotion whatsoever. His mind was working along the sure rails of logic, and logic told him there was something distinctly wrong with the situation. The Grull had pulled no physical weapons to use on him . . .

Uh-oh. He had thought too soon. A flash of blue brilliance overhead, a white, searing blast against the L-boat. Well, that was that. No phonocom now. He couldn't reach Earth if he wanted to. Next target: him!

Strangely enough, he didn't run. Here he was, standing in the middle of a plainly-lit clearing like a leaden ass, with the plosive racks of the enemy sighted right down his gullet. He still didn't move.

A Grull approached him, again its bearing radiating a question mark. Why won't this Sirian move? Surely he is no martyr. His mind shows no desire for self-destruction. Surely he is intelligent enough to comprehend the situation. Yes, he is intelligent. Why . . . ?

Lockhardt's mind struck.

It dropped the neural blocks and had leaped out to grapple the Grull intelligence before either Ed or the alien realized its intent. Then Ed's awareness was merged once more with his mind, and he felt it doing things it could never have done, that were impossible for a human being to do. It slashed with electrical sharpness into the relatively soft surface thoughts of the purile whirlwind. The Grull jerked, surprised.

What manner of flabby human is this that harbors such drastic, fearful amounts of mind force?

Surface thoughts stripped, Ed's mind locked around the Grull's psych in a crushing grip, and froze it. Then Lockhardt turned to the others, and even those inside the already-fleeing ships, and captured them in a like manner. After hours of nerve-racking fighting, captur-

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ing, and questioning, Lockhardt stood on the deck of the Grull flagship, in command and deathly afraid.

What had he done? How had he done it?

Some seconds after the last Grull was clamped in stasis, the huge, resourceful well within his mind had quickly and quietly closed up, leaving no detectable psychic scar, other than the uncertain sorrow of having gained, and then lost . . . *something*. And there he had been (and here he was), more or less in command of the situation, directing the beaten Grull fleet back toward the Central Suns and home.

As the sleek grey fleet flashed past Venus, Lockhardt gave a silent salute to the grave of the brave ship *Klystron*. But it had not died in vain, because he *had* accomplished his mission. The small war party of Grull he had captured had already yielded to him the location of the main bulk of the Grull hordes, as well as a general knowledge of their weaknesses, militarily and socially. The United Sirian Alliance could use information like that. They could use a telep like Lockhardt, when he got back.

* * *

NOW, just what is this about Ed Lockhardt's psych reports, Grunner?" U.S.A. General Pauling asked, seated in an easy chair. Across the broad brown desk, Max Grunner's totally bald head shook in despair.

"I don't know," he croaked hoarsely, pulling at the ends of his white mustache. "I've never seen anything like this before. The Psych Analyzer shows an almost complete reversal of his old emotion patterns, plus a thousand odd discrepancies in habits, thought pattern, *et* very much *cetera*."

"Hmm," General Pauling perused the typed reports. "I can't say I'm really surprised. After a run-in with the Grull, anybody would be liable to change. He must have taken quite a mental beating. And, too, he was the first Sirian to see and capture one of the enemy."

The gnome-like Dr. Grunner stood and paced the room impatiently.

"But that is exactly the point, General. He *couldn't* have handled that situation, unless these changes in his mind-power had already been effected!"

General Pauling licked his lower lip and sent a green-eyed stare after the pacing psychologist. Already effected!

"So someone tampered with Lockhardt's mind before he met the Grull?"

"Precisely. Someone or some*thing*. It wasn't much of a shift; just a rechanneling of neural

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energy here and there, and a few mind-blocks that could be broken down only if a certain set of circumstances developed."

"Which they did," Pauling mused. He looked up sharply. "Where is Lockhardt now?"

Grunner waved out one of the broad, barred windows that opened out onto Sirius's fifth planet. In the green distance could be seen a rather large group of white buildings, beyond which rose the needle spires of the spaceport. The Grull ships were thin shadows on the flight apron.

"Still going through Debrief. Had quite a set of burned-out ganglia. You know that new Doctor Hensen out of Procyon. Regular nut about strange psychoses."

"Another Grunner, eh?" the General smiled wryly, rising. "Well, thanks a lot for informing me, Max. I've got some loose ends to tie, and then I think I'll stop by for a check with your Young Doctor Hensen. Any new developments, just give me a yell."

They shook hands, then Pauling took the grav-drop to Power Center.

Buried a mile underground, the Thermonuclear Power broadcasting stations of the Dog Star were probably the most well-protected sites in the Galaxy, lying behind force- and psych-screens no jamming device could touch without giving warning. Pauling was swept from the tips of his greying hairs to the last molecules of protein on his toenails by at least half a dozen sprays as he shot downward in the elecab. At Stage V he halted the cab and stepped out into a bright, anesthetic corridor.

Though the hall was lined with doors, the entrance he was searching for bore the faceplate Records, and he found it near the end of the channelway.

"'Lo, Scotty!" he called through the open door, then stepped inside. The four walls were lined with chrysto-plates of past U.S. Alliance missions, the symmetry of the room marred only by a narrow, danger-red door in the opposite wall. He crossed the room and knocked on it.

"Be right out, Gus," he heard a voice say. Pauling leaned back against a table and examined his hands, wondering what he would find when the Record was dug up.

THE red door opened and a spacer of about the General's age stepped out. He wore a grin, glasses, and lab smock, and carried a new set of chrysto-plates.

"Well, how's business, Old Man?" Scotty Blake laughed shaking Gus Pauling's hand.

"Hot as Doradus. Damn Grull

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have really been giving the Alliance a shakeup," Pauling was serious. "I'm glad to see you, Scotty, but I've got some important matters to clear up, and Records seemed a good place to start."

"Why sure, Gus. Have a seat. Just let me file these plates." He checked their catalogue numbers against the files and whisked the metal cubes into their pigeon-holes. "Now, what can I do for you?"

Pauling leaned back in the metal chair and stared off into space.

"You've heard the news, I suppose, that one of our men came back with some captured Grull?"

Scotty nodded his head. "Yes. And I was a little surprised it was Lockhardt. He's a telep, is he not? His is the ship that exploded in the Terran system about a week ago. How'd he pull it off?"

The General looked up at Blake curiously.

"We don't know." Then, "Have you got the chrysto-plate of his mission? I think Alliance HQ said #337-2-TLL. I've got it hypnoed in me somewhere. Yeah, that was it."

"Must. We record everything."

Blake hooked onto a sliding bench and checked along one wall. He reached up and pulled out a little tray full of silver cubes arranged in neat stacks.

"Yep. Here's the newest mission cube. Want to hear it?"

"Please."

Scotty shoved it into the Analyzer and beamed the neuronic pickup at Gus. Pauling relaxed and closed his eyes and let his mind absorb the information.

. . . forced to enter Terran system by small party Grull warships. All systems functioning A-prime, weapon supply good, food supply good. I am trying to get closer to the star to receive power for energy bolts and Ether Resonator. The aft screens show Grull at high ecliptic and overtaking. (*Wavebeam beta —44 Galactic constant.*) *My pilot has all weapons on automatic, metascreens full on. Estimate five minutes to solar proximity. Approaching second planet* (image:radio pip hot, cloudy planet against indeterminate green) *and I notice . . . I feel . . .* ((((JUMP! PANIC! FEAR! JUMP!))))

Pauling found himself clawing at the door of Records.

"Whew! That one was strong!" he exclaimed, feeling the adrenalin slowly leaking back into its reservoir. He flopped back in the chair, dripping with sweat. "No wonder Lockhardt got out, if that came through Control!"

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"I should have warned you," Scotty apologized. "Some ships are more sensitive than others. Much more so than humans." He looked curiously at the little cube as he lifted it from the Analyzer. "But what was it? Grull mind contact?"

"No," Gus shook his head emphatically. "I've never beamed anything that strong before, and we've had plenty of mechanical Linkages with Grull minds. This was something different!"

Scotty toyed with the chrysto before handing it to Pauling.

"Had a talk with the pilot yet?"

"Nope. I was on my way over to Debrief when I thought of coming here. Now that I have his Record, I'd like to see what Ed Lockhardt has to say. We may have something important here. But I'm not sure. Not just yet."

He left Blake still checking over the *Klystron*'s past Records, and took the grav-lift to the spaceport. A dense droning sound, reminiscent of a swarming hive of bees, vibrated through the heavily-padded channelways of the Sirian Terminal. It was the awe-inspiring thunder of the great Alliance ships, boring tunnels through the eternal night between the stars.

Out there Mankind was fighting a desperate war. A war to the finish with a puzzling, vicious extra-Galactic race, and until now there had been no key to the enemy's weakness. Perhaps Lockhardt held that key. If he was Lockhardt.

DEBRIEF hung its shingle over the entranceway to an extremely small waiting room. Here Pauling sat cooling his heels while Procyon's Young Doctor Hensen decided to see him.

"You may go in, now, General Pauling," the metallic grillwork on the practical robot-secretary grated.

"Thanks," Gus said, but sarcasm was lost on the machine. Its fifty-two tentacles went back to the huming transcriber.

Hensen's office proved to be a relieving contrast to the almost too-functional outer office. Aside from the inevitable couch (now occupied by a snoring Ed Lockhardt, the General noticed), the windows were curtained in a pleasing yellow-on-green-on-grown, the lights were tinted an easy color, and the walls (wood paneling that smacked of feminity) were hung with abstracts of hyperspace, old starships, and full-color photos of the Dog Star. Pauling found himself staring in mild surprise at the woman bending over the Psych Analyzer at the head of the couch. She was dressed in

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the white pull-overs common among hospital technics, but the suit appeared blue in the dim, tinted light. She straightened and her face was a soft oval nearly overpowered by wide, violet eyes. Her hair was long and blue-black, curling loosely around her shoulders. For several moments she allowed the General to assimilate the fact that so shocked him: she was *humanoid,* but not *human!*

"Y-you're Doctor Hensen?" Pauling stammered.

"Dr. Grunner didn't tell you?" she asked, smiling slightly. Her lips were a trifle wide, but well-formed. Her skin appeared peach, and her features were human. The eyes, Pauling decided, were the give-away. No Terran possessed optics of such hypnotic depth and color.

"You wish a Link with Captain Lockhardt, General Pauling?"

"Umm," Gus ascertained, regaining his composure. "I would, yes. But—"

"If you take the Link first, General, we'll have more common ground to hash over," she interrupted logically. Pauling appreciated her voice, if not the suggestion. He stepped over to the couch's console and allowed the Procyon to fit the analog-helmet over his greying hair. He nodded and the psichologist flipped a switch.

. . . with the stars hanging over me, about to fall. Maybe if I wait longer, they'll slip up behind me! How can I shoot them if a laser has no ef——fect? Wait, I hear a sound. Maybe it's Them, inside me! Inside again! With the Power gone, how can I protect myse—

CAPTAIN LOCKHARDT THIS IS GENERAL PAULING DO YOU REMEMBER ME

—General? How can I hear the General when They are after me? Maybe it's another illusion. Maybe They . . .

THIS IS GENERAL PAULING CAPTAIN LOCKHARDT YOU ARE IN THE PSYCH ANALYZER NOW DO YOU UNDERSTAND

. . . Psych Analyzer? *General? Then I got back after all?*

YOU CAPTURED SOME GRULL ON MERCURY IN THE TERRAN SYSTEM ED YOU BROUGHT THE SHIPS BACK TO THE DOG DO YOU REMEMBER

((((dim flickerings of Grull ships, boiling cauldrons of the Central Suns, growing disc of Siria V))))

. . . Yes. I remember now.

CAN YOU REMEMBER HOW IT HAPPENED ED HOW DID YOU TAKE THE GRULL CAN YOU REMEMBER

((((dim flickerings of control room of *Klystron,* boiling images of the Grull invader closing in, growing disc of Venus))))

. . . I . . .

YOU WERE IN THE *Klystron*

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WHEN THE GRULL STRUCK HOW DID YOU GET OUT IN TIME

((((viewpanel showing empty space, no control units indicating enemy))))

. . . I thought I was free. I thought I had lost them. I was sitting in the pilot booth with the armament on automatic, and then the Grull showed. I dived into the Terran System—it was the only star nearby—to elude and recharge. I thought I could make it.

((((bright image cloudy planet, Venus. Bright image of the stars, and the five, glinting comets of the Grull ships))))

. . . I knew I wouldn't make it. Suddenly I was overcome; I noticed . . . felt . . .

((((JUMP! PANIC! FEAR! JUMP!))))

ARE you all right, General" psichologist Hensen asked. She was holding him with two strong arms against the tiled floor, concern on her pretty face. Pauling stopped his thrashings and sat up, feeling adrenalin coursing hot through his veins.

"Wow," he moaned, holding his head. The taped electrodes of the analog-helmet had been wrenched off. "I should have been expecting that burst of emotion. I've already beamed the Record of the flight," he explained.

"I forgot that you were human," Hensen said. "We Procyons don't have adrenal glands. Otherwise, it is still a heavy neural shock. Whatever broadcasted that warning packed plenty of power into it."

The General stood up, lined face showing surprise.

"You mean, that wasn't Lockhardt's brain pattern?"

"Couldn't be," Dr. Hensen said. "No human mind in existence could support neutral currents of that magnitude without visibly enlarged brain cortex. And Lockhardt's brain x-rayed normal."

The General chewed that over for several moments.

"Any suggestions, uh, Dr. Hensen?"

"Well, you've had more psyched background to the situation than I have, but offhand, I'd say we're standing on the verge of a discovery that could mean a victory for the Alliance. Whatever Lockhardt did to them, it's left the prisoners in complete mental stasis for more than a week. From my Link with him, he used some mind-force to make the fleeing Grull ships come back to pick him up. General, Lockhardt must have developed some hitherto unknown mental powers—something no one has ever dreamed of!"

To say that the Procyon was excited would have been a gross understatement. Her violet eyes

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glittered with some powerful emotion which Pauling sensed, rather then knew, would be completely alien to his own endocrine system.

Gus sat down in a handy chair and stared at his hands. With a new weapon such as the one Lockhardt seemed to have stumbled over, the Alliance would become invincible. Then their struggle to the stars would no longer be unequal in favor of the Grull, or any other alien life. Perhaps then Mankind would gain the guts to try the ghastly, awful, lives-consuming jump from this lonely star island to the next.

"General Pauling," the robot-secretary piped. "Phonocom from Alliance HQ. Mark IV."

Mark IV! The primary phone to Power Center!

"Here." Hensen indicated a wall screen. Gus stepped to it and flipped the COMMAND button. Immediately a colored test pattern resolved into one of P.C.'s chief technics.

"General Pauling!" he exclaimed, visibly relieved. Still the paleness of his face showed through a light spacetan. "The Space Force of the Sirian Fleet reported contact with a massed armada of Grull ships at twelve parsecs and closing. President Romley believes they're after Power Center."

"They would be," the General agreed. "Get Dr. Grunner out to the spaceport immediately, and have the *Hellfire* fueled and weaponed. I'll be out there directly with Dr. Hensen." Pauling broke contact.

"Well, I gather I'm going along," the Procyon said with a barely-detectable trace of sarcasm.

"Right. And so is Ed Lockhardt. Is he under sedation or in a natural sleep?"

"Hypnoed. It's safer for a shock victim. But he can come."

"Umm. Do you have a portable Analyzer here?" His green eyes traced through the room. None in sight.

"No," Hensen smirked. "What for? I'm a licensed telep Class 2."

The General shot her a look of surprise. A Class 2? Whew! That was really notching it up there. Of course, Procyon's light held a different quanta ratio . . .

THEY sealed Lockhardt in a lead-lined protective suit and adjusted his walk-easies, carrying the still-unconscious Captain on the grav-drop to ground level, then transferred to Terminal taxi. As the fast groundcar sped across the boralloy flight apron to the spindletop of the *Hellfire*, Pauling talked with Hensen.

"Naturally we would have been something more than first-

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class dolts to think the Grull would let this discovery get any further than was absolutely necessary. Since Lockhardt's flight was completely traceable, and no telling what sort of spy apparatus is built into those captured ships, I'm not too surprised they're showing up. The fact that they're *en masse* only reinforces the assumption that the secret Ed has locked up in his skull is vital to the Galaxy. Why didn't you tell me before that you were a Class 2?"

The Procyon smoothed her blue-black hair into place and braced herself as the groundcar screeched to a halt before the General's starship.

"I didn't think it time. But I'm afraid I won't be able to help you much. Relay-beaming Records is just about the extent of my talents. I can't read minds too well."

Gus watched her face closely as she spoke. Something was eating away at the back of his mind, but as yet he couldn't reach it. He dismissed it as they piled out of the robot-driven car, pulling the unconscious Lockhardt with him. As the taxi jetted back to the Terminal, half a mile across the black apron, Pauling paused to stare up at the efficient-looking hulk of the *Hellfire*.

Here was the latest word in firepower and mass destruction, and it pained him to call it his own. But it was, and as good a ship as ever sailed the starwinds. The positronic brain sported neural circuits remarkably resembling Pauling's own living nerve ganglia, as much a part of him when he was *en rapport* as were his arms or legs. It towered a hundred feet from the blastpad, carried two hundred thousand tons of water as fuel for its hungry thermodrive, yet was easily dwarfed by the three Sirian battleships parked a few miles away. It was armed, literally, to the teeth.

He mounted the force-ramp with an involuntary shudder.

"You have a beautiful ship," Hensen said. Pauling shot a suspicious glance at her face, but the large violet eyes were impassive. He merely nodded in reply, and directed the Procyan and the encased Captain down a narrow corridor to the sickbay.

Ed Lockhardt safely strapped in a grav-couch, Gus accompanied Hensen to Control, and slipped into a pilot booth beside her.

"My, aren't we intimate," the Procyan said sardonically.

"Only one pilot booth in Control, and I don't want you out of my sight. Dr. Grunner, when he gets here, can ride in sickbay with Lockhardt."

He punched the CLEAR PAD button with a disgusted jab. He

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wondered where Max was; the psychologist should have been on board long before he and the Procyan arrived. Gus reached around the . . . girl . . . and fastened the grav-shield across both of them, then searched the viewpanels for sight of the Doctor.

HE'S on his way now, from Terminal Three," Hensen said suddenly. Pauling glanced at her, and her eyes were strained shut. The screen showed a black dot rushing out of the far building. A ground-car.

As it approached the starship, its speed increased. A strange feeling of apprehension started in his chest, quickly spreading to and gripping his stomach. He looked sharply, questioningly at the psichologist, at the same time pressing the Control bar.

The myriad pulsing thoughts of the *Hellfire*'s brain wove a strangely-familiar, textured pattern of awareness through Control. Coupled with it were the low, subvocal echoes of what Gus identified as the Procyan's psych, thick with a growing prescience of approaching danger.

"What is it?" he directed at her.

A puzzled pause.

"I . . . don't know. I noticed . . . I feel . . ."

((((LIFT! PANIC! FEAR! LIFT!))))

Before Pauling could recover from the neural shock, Hensen's hands had flashed over the console, and the terrible, clawing clutches of heavy acceleration, unalleviated by the ship's grav field, tore at his body and dragged his mind down into unconsciousness. The *Hellfire* raised ground.

GENERAL PAULING THIS IS GWYN HENSEN DO YOU HEAR ME

Gwyn? So that was her first name. Too bad she was an alien. What am I thinking about?

GENERAL PLEASE WAKE UP THE GRULL ((((image of many-tiered layers of grey, sleek darts against the shimmering curtain of space)))) ARE UPON US I THINK I HAVE THE KEY BUT I NEED YOU GENERAL PLEASE DO YOU UNDERSTAND ME

Why should I be hearing her voice. I'm dead. Why should I care about the Grull? It doesn't matter anymore. Nothing does. Go away, psichologist Procyon alien Gwyn Hensen. Go back to your alien planet and your alien star. Leave me alone.

PLEASE GUS YOU DO UNDERSTAND ME I KNOW YOU MUST WAKE UP WE ARE IN THE *Hellfire* AND THE GRULL ARE CLOSE

Why was I so afraid when we lifted. I could have sworn I'd

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felt that before. I know I have. *Back with Scotty Blake. Again with Lockhardt.*

Lockhardt. He brought all this on us. If he hadn't found it, *the Grull would never have dared come so close to the Dog. His fault.* It? *He shouldn't have found* it? *What* did *he find?*

PLEASE GUS FOR THE GALAXY FOR THE DOG FOR MANKIND FOR THE STARS PLEASE —

Why all this fuss I'm just dead. Why need me?

THE *Hellfire* IS YOUR SHIP AND ONLY YOURS

Oh. The ship won't obey her. She'll die too. A shame. She was so pretty, even if she was an alien.

HUMAN I AM HUMAN

Alien!

HUMAN

You lie! A Procyon! A telep!

A MUTATION

Ah? ((((image of four-eyed purple monster, replaced suddenly, appallingly by a purple, swirling whirlpool of malignant sparks and horrible thoughts))))

A GRULL! ((((fear, pleading, waning hope)))) PLEASE GUS WAKE UP THE GRULL ARE HERE THEY WILL BREAK THROUGH THE METASCREENS IN A MOMENT OH GUS—

((((PANIC! FEAR))))

* * *

DOWN dark corridors Gus Pauling ran, driven by a livid, pulsing torrent of fear. He skidded around a corner.

Oh God! *The Grull!*

A whirling, stabbing purple miasma of evilness lunged at him, and he turned and ran. He came to a steep stairwell and fled down it, past many floors, barely noticing the huge signs drifting, glowing greenly in the darkness before each level.

SPEECH

LOGIC

SIGHT

HEARING

SMELL

TOUCH

He glanced behind him, and the horde of Grull came plummeting down. He shunted back his awareness of them, focusing on the darker, steeper stairs ahead of him, fear increasing in a vicious syndrome of emotive power and logic-freezing panic. The green sign floated before him:

LAST FLOOR: EGO

Ego!

The Grull were hunting down in his own mind, and he was trapped! Pinned against the last wall of existence, against himself. He stopped on the lip of the abyss, halted by a far distant cry. It came from down the corridor, from one of the millions of long, dark, twisting passages of his motor reflex centers. Gus stopped and listened, hearing the rushing cascade of bioelec-

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trical static that was his own mind, balanced on the very edge of the black pit.

gus!

So tiny. So far away. How could he expect such a puny, helpless voice to protect him from the Grull?

He glanced behind him, sudden anger and humiliation in the atmosphere. The Grull had driven him down into his own mind! Far into it, and were even now taking over his faculties. And here was the Last Outpost. The final stage before dissolution. As long as his consciousness retained a hold on the motor regions, the Grull were powerless to use his body. And here, if nothing else, he could end his own life with a sharp snap at the lifelines to the heart and lungs.

Gus!

That voice again. Closer, too. It came from the corridors somewhere ahead of him.

He turned and walked away from the last stairway, into the shadowy darkness, on all sides coursing the hidden messages from his body: ((((. . . physical violence against right calf, thigh, hip, rib cage (pressure on lungs great) arm, shoulder. Head spun violently in one direction, eyeballs lax, no signals from the balance organs [—*of course not,* Gus thought. *They've all been taken over by the Grull* —] lungs report foul air oxygen content dropping . . .))))

GUS!

Gwyn!

He saw her now, crawling laboriously up the black corridor, and didn't stop to wonder how he saw her in the dark, or how he saw her at all. He ran to her and put his mind around her and suddenly the terrible fear was gone.

"Oh, Gus," she said, and her voice was strange, far-off. "Please. Listen. I think I can help us. Poor Lockhardt died from the acceleration, but I know now what his new power was. His *ship!* Somehow he Linked with its mind."

"The ship?" The tiny bit of memory he had strained to bring to the surface suddenly flowed along the ganglia of the channelway walls, and he reached out somehow and grasped it.

Lockhardt was a telep, too!

"Yes," Gwyn Linked in. "A telep, a mutant. That was why he never grew above a Captain in rank. They wouldn't trust too great a responsibility to an . . . alien."

GUS suddenly realized he was embracing her mind, and his ego and hers had merged. He ran along the little alleys of thought and emotion for a moment, not wanting to draw back to himself. Somehow he felt . . . complete.

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"Quickly," Gwyn urged. "Follow me back. I think I have the key now. If we can merge minds with the ship, as Lockhardt must have accidentally done, the mental powers built into its brain, coupled with mine and yours, might give us the strength we need to overcome the enemy."

He ran beside her down halls of odd, filled emptiness, feeling the faint breath of thought and fear from the walls, sensing the Grull in pursuit, but he was safe. He was complete now, in some wonderful way, and the Grull could be hanged.

He emerged then, to his amazement, to awareness. He saw himself twisting madly on the sickbay table, and felt his arms stretching out to hold himself down. Three Grull were in the room, shedding unholy, purple light on the hospital equipment.

Relax, Gus. You are in my mind, came Gwyn's voice in his head. *It was the only way I could prevent the Grull from capturing your ego.*

He watched his—her—arm reach out and inject a heavy sedative into . . . Gus Pauling's arm, and was strangely relieved when the man stopped struggling in the restrainer, suddenly lax.

Now, came the thought, *we Link with the ship.*

Pauling's mind took over, and he guided the Procyon's body from sick-bay to Control, slid it into the analog harness, and clamped on the Control helmet. Behind him came the Grull, with their incessant mental battering rams that now had so little effect on his thoughts. They were harmless. They were less than harmless. They were doomed.

The Grull disappeared.

Where did they go? Pauling demanded. Again fear had its foot ensconced in the door.

Link with the ship first! came the brisk command.

He flipped the Control bar.

The quick, flickering intelligence that was the true entity *Hellfire* was suddenly present, its mechanical, powerful mind clicking along the routes of logic, dealing with the trifling technical problems of keeping the ship alive, and the more important task of watching for the enemy. Retained in its memory was the recent presence of Grull, and the metascreens had gone up, as planned. But now the screens were down, and the pilot-mind gone, and the Grull were gone.

Gone!

Search as they would, the combined intelligences of Gus, Gwyn and the *Hellfire* could not find them. The Grull were nowhere to be thought.

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WHOP! The sound intruded.

Q. What was that? A. Plosive shell amidships. Orders? A. Locate and return fire.

Report: *done.*

Result?: *nothing.*

Gus this is where the key was used by Lockhardt. He must have been en rapport with his ship (Klystron) *when the Grull attacked. He retained its knowledge even after the ship was destroyed!*

That's it! Hellfire, *what do we do next?*

GRULL. STOP! FREEZE! I (WE) COMMAND YOU.

The three minds that were one reached out through space and seized the long grey shapes of the enemy that were already fleeing the not-understood happenings aboard the Sirian ship. Too late to stop them, Gus/Gwyn/*Hellfire* watched the warnings crackle out into the ether, the enemy's last words to his own kind: the dread message of defeat. The Sirians were invincible.

* * *

Feeling better?

You bet!

Gwyn and Gus exchanged mental embraces as they sat waiting for President Romley of the United Sirian Alliance to speak. Across the richly-carpeted room in the Capitol Building on Siria V, sat Scotty Blake and a team of P.C./Alliance psychologists.

"General Pauling, er, Doctor Hensen," the balding, rather plump Chief Executive began, "I can't tell you how much the Alliance thanks you for this truly remarkable discovery. It came at a time when it was most needed by the people of the Galaxy. I don't suppose I have to tell you that our federation was floundering in high seas." The President's black eyes strayed across the room to the psychologists. "I believe Mr. Blake has a few answers to the questions you may have in mind, and to several of my own. What about it, Mr. Blake?"

"Yes sir." Blake stood nervously and walked over to Gus and Gwyn. He carried a tiny silver cube in his hand, and it was shaking visibly.

"Dr. Grunner was killed when the *Hellfire* lifted, but the Psych Analyzer has already shown that he was under the compulsion of the Grull. To that effect, he was carrying a small but adequate thermite bomb on his person, and it was his intent to destroy the *Hellfire* and both of you, as well as Ed Lockhardt. As it was, only he was killed when the backwash of the starship smashed the bomb into detonation.

"As for your strange experiences with the mind-entity of

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the *Hellfire*, I have only this to say:" CONGRATULATIONS!

General Pauling looked up with considerable surprise as Scotty's thought formed in his head.

"You too?" he asked.

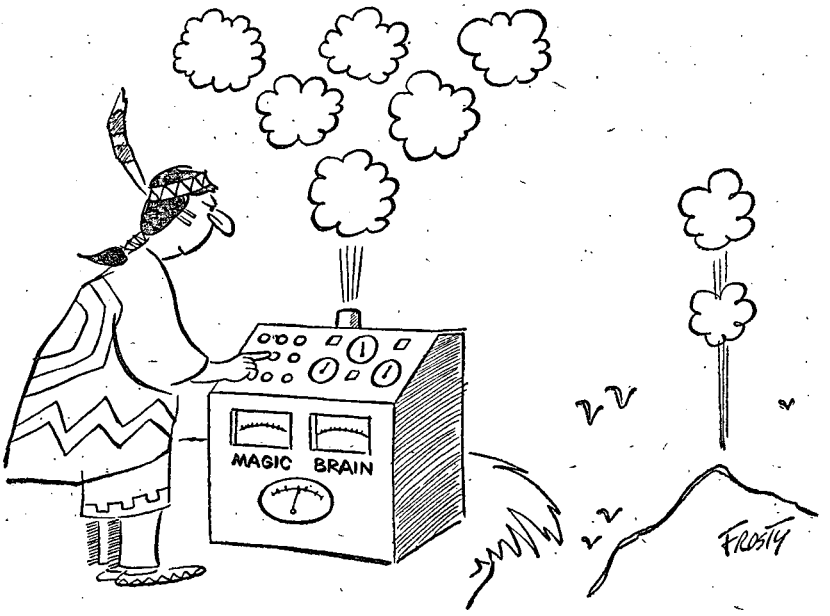
"Me too," Scotty laughed. "And that psychographer over there has a complete Record of the whole mind-exchange that took place. Including—" he blushed— "a few personal aspects. P.C.'s working around the clock on new methods of co-opting pilots and ships, and feeding them power. And naturally the Sirian Alliance Space Force is having a field day retraining its troops. You two have really set the race of Mankind up, you know. We have something now even Terra can't ignore!"

Not so many minutes later Gwyn and Gus and Scotty were taking the grav-drop to the housing center, and Scotty smiled as the other two kissed.

"When's the wedding?" he asked.

Gus and Gwyn laughed across at Blake. "We *are* married," they said.

THE END



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(*Continued from page 7*)

I feel perhaps you spoke too hastily and without examining the issues carefully. Your motives may have been good but you succeeded only in attacking a fairly dedicated and helpful profession.

James H. Kleckner
70 Radnor Rd.,
Great Neck, N.Y.

● *No attack intended. Still, your two "prime objections" to touchstones apply equally as well to tranquilizing drugs. That is, they treat symptoms rather than causes; they encourage reliance on superstition—i.e., a magic pill, possibly to the exclusion of other methods—i.e., action or therapy.*

Dear Editor:

During the past several months your letter columns have expressed much controversy on the stories of David Bunch. So I was glad to have the chance to see what it was all about in the November issue of FANTASTIC. I'll admit that I was puzzled. Matter of fact I was so puzzled I read the story, "Awareness Plan," twice trying to puzzle out what all the noise was about, but I failed to see the problem—except as it might exist in the psyche of the individual reader. To me it is a good, solid, well written science fantasy concerning two officials of an oppressive government who must deal with a people ground into complete apathy. One says, in effect, "Let's kill and maim a few and the others will show the proper respect." The other one says, "To hell with 'em. Kill 'em all." A perfectly reasonable plot for science fantasy, if somewhat on the gruesome side, with very nice characterization.

Perhaps I've read too much science fiction and fantasy to get too shook up by anything that appears. I cut my reading teeth on Jules Verne and Edgar R. Burroughs, and was completely enthralled by the first appearance of AMAZING STORIES in the late twenties. I'll have to admit that I've only been an occasional fan during the years, but it has been something of a surprise to me when after a lapse of perhaps five or ten years, I buy one of the current crop of sf magazines, and get just about the same kick out of them that I got so many years ago. If anything, this indicates to me that sf is a timelessly appealing field, at least for some of us, and it leads me to wonder just "what is science fiction all about?"

During my latest siege of fandom, dating from about 1958, I've seen at least two descriptions. John Campbell of ANALOG insists that it is an extrapolation of present day science into the

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future, which is at least partially true, and he turns out some great stories, as well as putting the needle to some of the more ossified segments of conventional science—a needed service. On the other hand, Theodore Sturgeon in a recent article in IF states that sf is about *"everything"*. I think Sturgeon comes closest to the factual truth concerning the field as a whole. I think the definition could be made a bit more definitive, however, by stating that science fiction and fantasy is an extrapolation, exaggeration, or distortion of anything man has ever thought or ever done, and ranges in content from such delightful whimsies as Jack Sharkey's "It's Magic, You Dope!" in your November FANTASTIC, to the more coldly, almost predictive science-fiction of "Escape From Orbit" by Poul Anderson in the October AMAZING. In short it touches on all phases of human (and non-human) life.

So, getting back to what touched this letter off, I would say that David Bunch has a very definite place in science fiction and fantasy. I only wish I could write as well as he does—as well as he or any other published writer. Matter of fact, I'm going to try. Do you have any room in your pages for a new, if somewhat middle aged writer?

Niel C. Houman
San Diego, Calif.

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● *Welcome aboard, or welcome back. And don't you know all writers are middle-aged? If they are not born that way, they become that way after the first few reflections. I imagine your letter has taken a few years off Bunch's shoulders.*

Dear Editor:

What ever happened to your great White hope? I'm speaking, of course, of James White, author of "Second Ending." This won't set well, but I've come to the conclusion that his novel was the *only* outstanding story you've published since I began reading FANTASTIC and AMAZING regularly a year and a half ago.

I would go so far as to rate it one of the most enthralling stories of the past five to 10 years. This is all the more unusual since your other recent fare has been so tasteless, as far as I'm concerned.

It's not that your other authors can't write; in fact, to take issue with a recent correspondent, I would say that what they lack is ideas, not a polished style. They have the mechanical know-how. Detail and description are handled sometimes brilliantly. But they just don't qualify as storytellers. To take but two examples out of many: "Specimen," by C. C. MacApp, in September 1961, was very smoothly written. It built up beautifully to a cli-

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max . . . that never took place. The reader was left hanging, back where he started when the story began. "Ripeness Is All," by Jesse Roarke, May 1962, was even better written. It was certainly a finely delineated study. But it too was incomplete, more a lengthy description, than a short story. I singled out these two stories, because they particularly exasperated me; they did not realize their potential, in spite of great possibilities inherent in each.

But "Second Ending" was completely satisfying in all respects. White created a high level of reader interest in some visually unforgettable scenes. The character understanding and empathy he displayed was similar to the earlier Jack Vance, as in his "Planet of the Damned," and "New Bodies for Old," and Rex Gordon's "First on Mars."

In some respects, the White tour de force can be compared to Saki's most powerful work, "The Unbearable Bassington." I suppose most are unfamiliar with that story. It delineates the moral and intellectual decay of the protagonist, who, like White's hero, is isolated from his fellowmen. While Saki described one result of such isolation—creating an overwhelmingly oppressive aura of pessimism—White took another tack—successfully suffusing his indomitable man with the will to survive. Both were similar in the remarkably imaginative utilization of daily events, to convey a feeling of reality.

I might add that the low level sf story telling generally has reached is not confined to any particular magazines; the whole field is in a desultory state.

Robert K. Jones
855 N. Greenbrier St.
Arlington 5, Virginia

● *A point well-taken. Too often a writer will attempt to rescue an idea that just seems to miss by surrounding it with a polished setting of style. We try, however, to find the unbeatable combination and, if we may disagree, we think many of our stories rate as high, idea-wise, as they do style-wise.*

Dear Miss Goldsmith:

Congratulations on producing 2 FANTASTIC covers in succession worthy of the name of the zine (Oct. & Nov. issues). Until this time your claims of cover illo improvement were unimpressive. I don't care what illustrators you employ (tho I'm still partial to Finlay) just encourage the boys to put lots of imagination & skill into their efforts.

James R. Goodrich
7 Third St.,
Somerville, N.J.

● *A Finlay cover will appear on the April issue of our sister magazine,* AMAZING.

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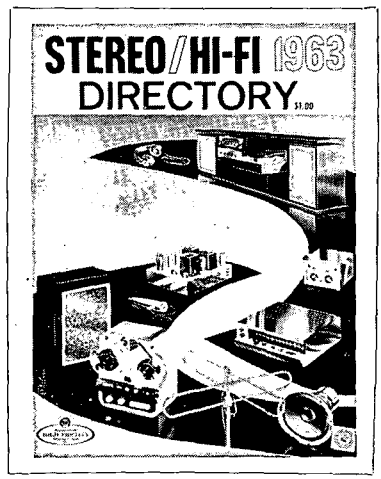

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"The two men whirled and darted their eyes all over the landscape, trying to see the shadows that would reveal the Mad Ones."

See **LET 'EM EAT SPACE**

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